

Issues
Eighteen/
Nineteen

\$10.00

YARF!

THE • JOURNAL • OF • APPLIED • ANTHROPOMORPHICS



Monika Livingston

Price List - 1990

Black & White Character Drawings

	<u>9 x 12</u>	<u>11 x 14</u>
<u>Pencils</u>		
One Character	\$10	\$20
Two Characters	\$15	\$20
<u>Inked</u>		
One Character	\$25	\$35
Two Characters	\$30	\$40

(Larger sizes available, price quotes on request.)

Color Character Drawings

	<u>9 x 12</u>	<u>11 x 14</u>
<u>Inked, then colored in</u>		
One or Two Characters	\$45	\$55

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<u>On illustration board</u>	
9 x 12 to 11 x 14	\$75 & up
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(Book & game covers, price quotes on request)

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For drawings & paintings

Up to 11 x 14	\$5 - 10
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Name Tags

Small (2 x 3) or large (3 x 4)

Color	\$15 - 45
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Logos

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	<u>One Side</u>	<u>Two Sides</u>
<u>T-shirts</u>		
Full Image	\$35 - 45	\$45 - 55
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Full image on one side, lettering only on other		\$55 - 70

(Price quotes for other wearable items on request)

NOTES

1. T shirts are American made, 50/50 blend. 100% cotton shirts are available on special request.
2. Romantic images are ok, but X-rated erotica is not accepted.
3. Allow 4 to 6 weeks for delivery, however, time needed for completion may vary depending upon schedule.
4. A deposit of at least 50% is required before any project is started. Balance due upon completion.
5. Mail orders are accepted: add \$3.00 for shipping & handling.

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THIS ISSUE

Cover : "Last Minute Blues"

2. Flaming Hairballs
2. Freefall
3. Patten's Pontifications
4. "Gummy Bear"
5. Tales From Valencia
16. "Monika"
17. "The Lighthouse" (part 3)
26. "Dancebunny"
27. Empires
38. "Ditzy Cat"
39. "Mr. Popularity"
48. "VXN-128"
49. Buffalo Wings
57. "Vixen I"
58. "Bast Before..."
63. "Vixen II"
64. Model Sheet: "David Duck"
65. NitroCoon
72. Robert & Katrina: "To Boing or Not To Boing"
74. "Vixens III-VII"
79. "The Lighthouse" (part 4)
90. "High Octane"
91. Buffalo Wings
99. "RedBarn 88"
100. "Samantha"
101. "Misty and Chris"
102. "Whoa There, Sandy!"
103. San Diego Comic Con '90 Art Jam
106. "How It Works"
107. "Hogweed"
116. "Fleshdance"
117. "Wok, Don't Run"
118. "Nice Asp"
119. The Last Bits
- Back Cover: "In Memoriam"

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FLAMING HAIRBALLS

Editorial ramblings and letters of comment from us to you and from you to us.

"Look, Dear, we have whales!"

What IS this monster you have in your hands? Something this large and heavy should have warnings attached to it...

This issue is a combined issue 18 and 19. This was done for a variety of reasons having to do with scheduling, staff unavailability, and blown deadlines on contributions. The end result is three issues' worth of material packed into two issues' worth of price. Subscribers will have this issue counted as both issues 18 and 19... subscribers whose subscriptions end with #18 will receive this issue. Such a deal...

In other news, this issue is the last issue for one of our staff members, Lance Rund. He wants his life back. Sez Lance, "Don't think it's been a little slice of Heaven... 'cause it hasn't..." Lance was, of course, immediately flogged after saying that.

Thanks to Garth Minette and Jimmy Chin for eleventh-hour help (INK! INK! INK!)...

What does the future hold? What can we look forward to? YARF! will soon be publishing a serialized novel by Watts Martin (author of "A Gift of Fire, A Gift of Blood" and "The Lighthouse")... Empires will continue its run, of course (what's YARF! without a healthy dose of war 'n gravtanks?)... and a few other things...

We will also be printing a few of the Art Jams which have been circulated at various conventions. They're some of the

weirdest collections of art you're likely to see.

In the "must see" category is John Kricfalusi's Ren & Stimpy Show on Nickelodeon and MTV... probably the most vile animation ever produced. This is required viewing.

Something else to check out, particularly for Empires fans, is Furlough from Antarctic Press. This all-military-furry comic features our very own Chris Grant with "Thunderhead", the sequel to the currently-running "Ace of Spades" story appearing in YARF!. This comic, due to its low print run, may be a bit hard to find... keep looking.

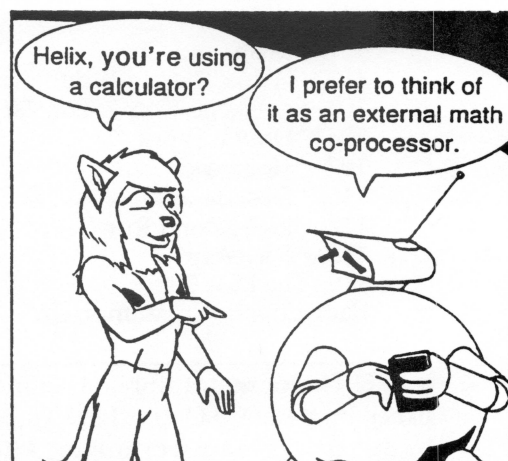
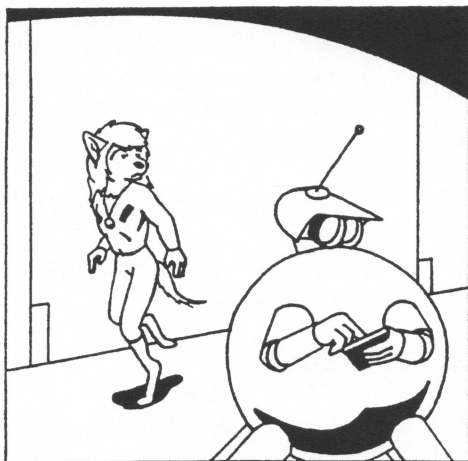
Anyway, this is the ConFurence issue. What are you doing reading cheap editorials instead of talking to people? Get out there and meet folks! G'wan, scram...

DEADLINES...DEADLINES...DEADLINES...

Deadlines are not unlike death... they are inevitable, inescapable, and hold terror in the hearts of us all...

Issue 20	March 3, 1992
Issue 21	April 17, 1991
Issue 22	June 2, 1991
Issue 23	July 17, 1991 (San Diego Comic Con issue. Another big one...)

Freefall by Mark Stanley



Patten's Pontifications

Book Review: K-9 Corps

Reviewed by Fred Patten

K-9 Corps, By Kenneth Von Gunden. New York, Ace Books, February 1991, 229 pages, \$3.95; ISBN 0-441-09128-8.

They are the best freelance space scouts in the galaxy; genetically altered dogs with enhanced senses and the gift of speech. They are Beowulf, Grendel, Mama-san, Anson, Ozma, Littlejohn, Frodo, Sinbad and Pandora – and they will stand beside Ray Larkin, their human leader, against any danger. Anywhere. At any cost. They are the K-9 Corps. (back cover blurb).

This first volume in a new series of galactic exploration-team adventure novels is enjoyable reading. Ray and his talking scout dogs (shown in Jim Thiesen's cover painting as Great Danes or Mastiffs, although Von Gunden avoids describing them except to frequently refer to them as "huge" or "immense") are intelligent and likeable. So is almost everyone else except for the villains. The story reeks with macho good fellowship, dramatic action against the ferocious wildlife of frontier planets, and trailblazer versus bureaucrat conflict. A reference to telepathic *smaller and more independent scout cats that served with special teams* (p. 81) hints at other anthropomorphic characters who may be introduced in the sequels.

The writing and the action are generally good, on a scene by scene basis. The overall story, unfortunately, doesn't make a lot of sense. Ray and his nine dogs are one of a number of scout teams that hire their services to corporations or to the Federation's Planetary Colonization Bureau, to check out newly-discovered worlds and to verify whether they are suitable for terraforming and human settlement. It is implied that humans (and their bioengineered dogs and cats) are the only intelligent life in the known galaxy. Ray and his pals, and several more scout teams – a total of 137 explorers and scientists – are disturbed at the beginning of their new assignment because their contract to investigate Chiron virtually orders them to "discover" that the planet has no intelligent life, and to ignore all evidence to the contrary. (Saying "Dances with Wolves" should let you guess the rest of the novel.) Okay, this assumes that the government would be naïve enough to expect scientists and explorers – notoriously anti-authoritarian types – to "not notice" intelligent natives just because they've been ordered not to, even when the natives are throwing spears at them and trying to burn their base camps. Actually, the government isn't that naïve, because it's posted a military commando team to liquidate any explorer who disobeys the orders and mentions natives in his reports. Presumably the other scouts won't notice this, or will blame the natives who they aren't supposed to have noticed. Hmm, just what kind of place is this Federation? Well, despite being a single galactic government with no apparent enemies, it seems to be heavily armed. Why? The military has to defend itself against the judiciary, while the judiciary has secret agents licensed to kill who are spying on the military, and both are scared to death of the executive...

It's an interesting galaxy, as long as you don't mind some big lapses in logic.

There's one that relates directly to the dogs. Although they are described as equal in intelligence to humans – and Von Gunden does a fine job of showing them to be that smart, yet still possessing canine personality traits which make them distinct from humans – they all talk in a mild Bizarro English. "If Ray say so, we work with them, sure enuff." "What we do?" "Is fun to chase antelopes once more." "No, I on way to see Ray when saw you here. Thought I tell you first." This leads to a touching moment on the next-to-last page when the dogs ask Ray to teach them better English. That's a nice bit of character development, except that if you think about it, there's no reason why the dogs shouldn't have spoken normal English from the beginning. Nobody taught them to talk funny; their dialog is just written that way. But Beowulf and the other dogs are such appealing mutts that readers must forgive the flaws in the writing for the opportunity to meet them.

• • •

Book Review: K-9 Corps: Under Fire

Reviewed by Fred Patten

K-9 Corps: Under Fire, by Kenneth Von Gunden. New York, Ace Books, August 1991, 250 pages, \$3.95; ISBN 0-441-42494-5

K-9 Corps II is more of the same. This time Ray Larkin, Beowulf, Grendel, Gawain, Tajil and others – some of the same dogs as in the first novel, and some replacements for casualties are sent to *join the military compound on the planet Hephaeustus in guarding the Federation prisoners sentenced to the ruby mines there. Simple – except for the riots of the miners, the attacks by the native predators, the treachery among the troops – and the very dangerous powers of the rubies themselves, rare gems capable of increasing the psi-powers of any sentient life...* (back cover blurb).

The dogs still talk funny. The independent scout cats make their appearance. They are more aloof and snotty, and their grammar is much more sophisticated, but otherwise they're on a par with the dogs. The two teams get along like the Army and the Navy; there's a lot of interservice rivalry during peacetime, but they work together smoothly once the actions start.

One interesting change is that, as a result of the political fallout from the events in the first novel, it is revealed that the Federation government has been suppressing news of other intelligent species in the galaxy. So in the three years between the two novels, galactic civilization has evolved from humans-only to looking like the antenna sequence from "Star Wars."



HI! THIS IS ROZ GIBSON, AND WELCOME TO VALENCIA! IT IS ABOUT 40 MILES NORTH OF LOS ANGELES, RIGHT BY SIX FLAGS MAGIC MOUNTAIN. WE'RE RIGHT AT THE EDGE OF THE HIGH DESERT, AND THE HOT, DRY CLIMATE IS GREAT FOR BUGS AND SPIDERS. TROUBLE IS — NO ONE EVER TOLD THEM TO MOVE OUT WHEN CONDOS WERE BUILT HERE!

HUGHES

TARGET

WRITTEN AND INKED BY ROZ GIBSON
DRAWN BY ROZ GIBSON
JODY KOOLSTRA
JULIANA KORSBORN
TRACY HORTON

Table's From VALENCIA

PART 1
BUGS IN VALENCIA

One day last summer Tracy came over to visit and show me what she was working on for the next ROWRBRAZZLE. Since I was also finishing up my contribution (part 3 of ESCAPE) she looked at at that while I looked at her story.

Suddenly she pointed to a spider that was crawling across the carpet, straight towards my bed!!

I reacted quickly, mashing the spider with what I happened to have in my hands at the time.

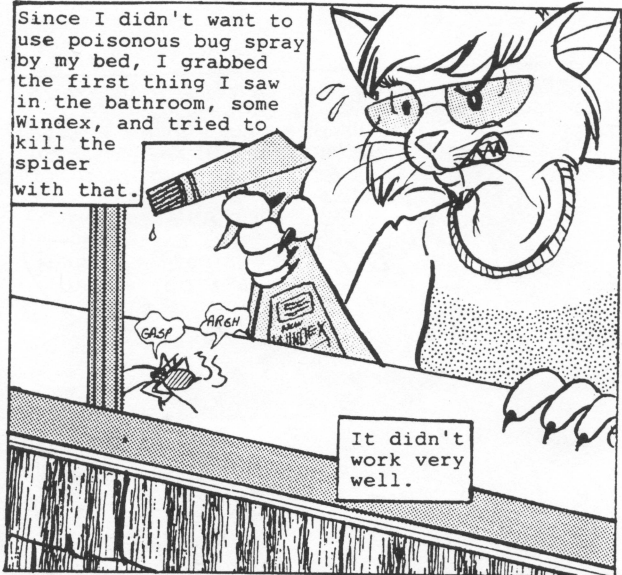
Which unfortunately happened to be Tracy's artwork! Sorry, Tracy.

AK!

Another time I was working at my desk and I saw a spider crawling along the windowsill. It was in a place where I couldn't effectively mash it, so I had to resort to other methods.



Since I didn't want to use poisonous bug spray by my bed, I grabbed the first thing I saw in the bathroom, some Windex, and tried to kill the spider with that.



It didn't work very well.

I went back into the bathroom and took the next thing I saw, a bottle of fancy facial soap called Liquid Neutrogena, and tried that. It worked perfectly, encasing the spider like a fly in amber. I left it there to set.



Later on that day I told my roommate, Jody, what I had done. Our other roommate, Jim Rentzis (who is from Greece, read all his dialogue with a Greek accent), stuck his head in the door and had this to say:



ALL I HEARD WAS THE WORDS "SPIDER" AND "LIQUID NEUTROGENA"

He then got mad at me for using the soap to kill a spider, since it costs 5\$ a bottle.

Despite his dislike of some of my methods, Jim often called on me to kill spiders, since he was more afraid of them than I was.



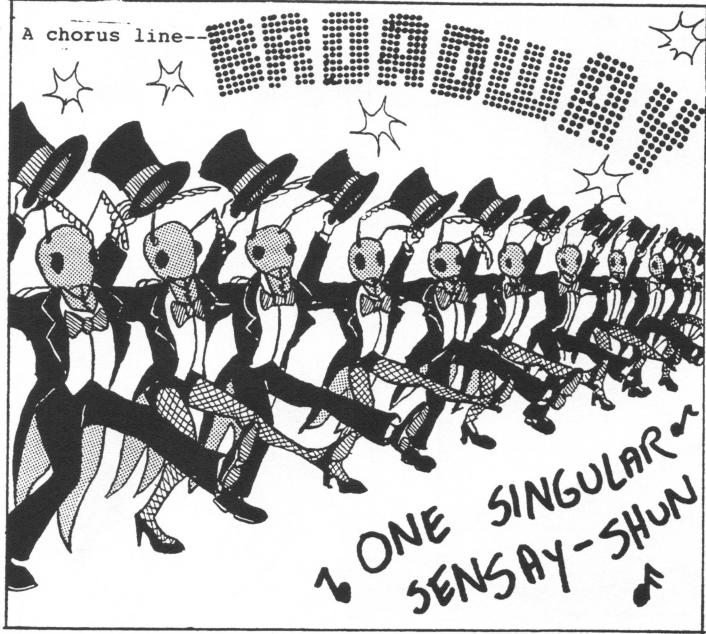
Fatt Kitty

THERE ARE PROBABLY EVEN MORE ANTS THAN SPIDERS HERE! THEY CAN BE A REAL PROBLEM IF YOU LIVE ON THE GROUND FLOOR.

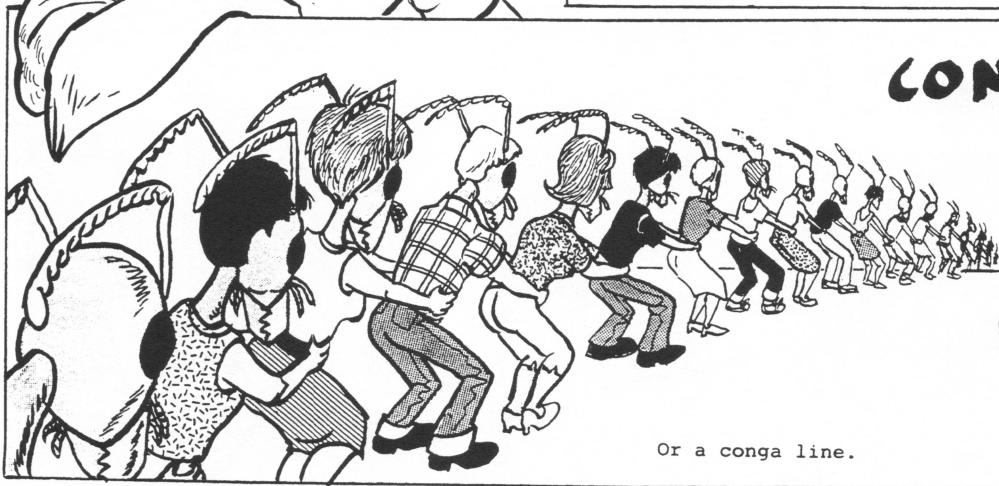
ONE OF THE MORE PRESSING QUESTIONS OF OUR TIME IS WHAT A TRAIL OF ANTS SHOULD BE PROPERLY CALLED --



A chorus line--



ONE SINGULAR SENSAY-SHUN



CONGA

CONGA

CON-6A

Or a conga line.

The people at work did not share my enthusiasm over this issue....



I THINK IT SHOULD BE CALLED A CONGA LINE BECAUSE--

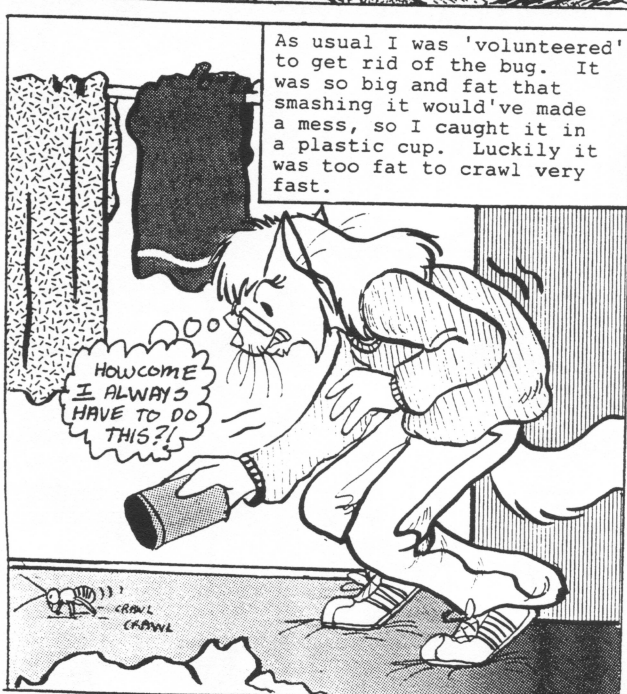
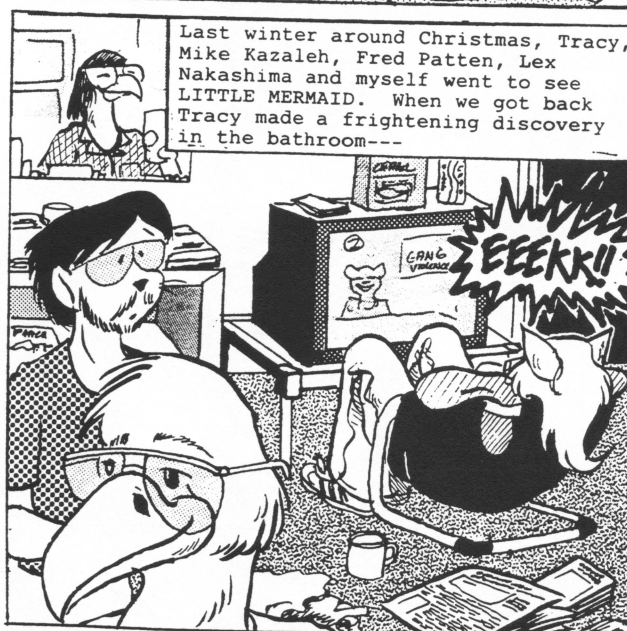
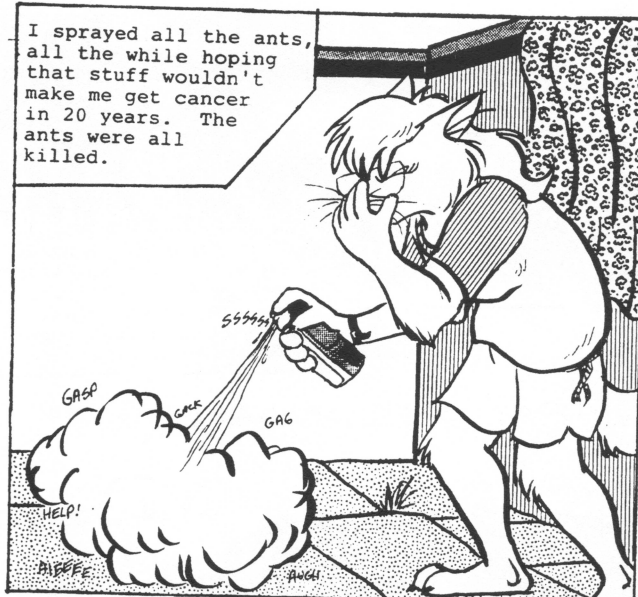
WE'VE ALWAYS CALLED IT A CHORUS LINE BUT--



THIS IS THE DUMBEST CONVERSATION I'VE EVER HEARD!!!

Once I came out onto the patio and saw Jim hosing mildew off the shower curtain. Each of us had to do the housework one week a month, and Jim was good about that, at least. I usually would pay Jody to do my share.





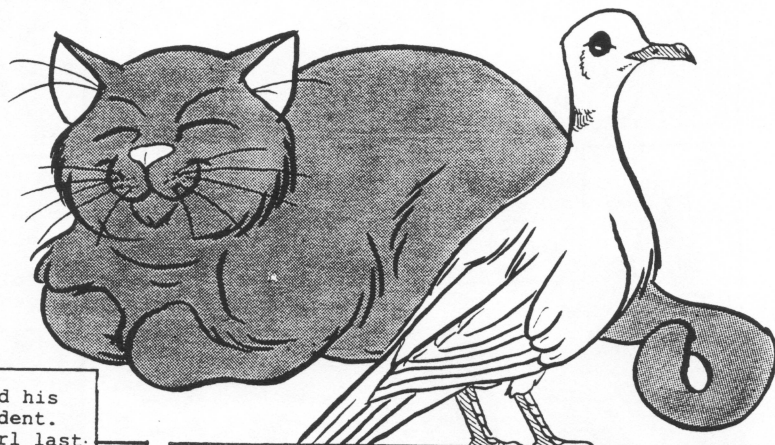
I eventually let it go outside the apartment. It was such an unusual bug I couldn't bring myself to kill it.



Tracy and Jody wanted me to kill it. They said it was so fat and bloated because it was ready to 'spawn' and make more Jerusalem crickets.

PART 2:

JEEM AND ANIMALS



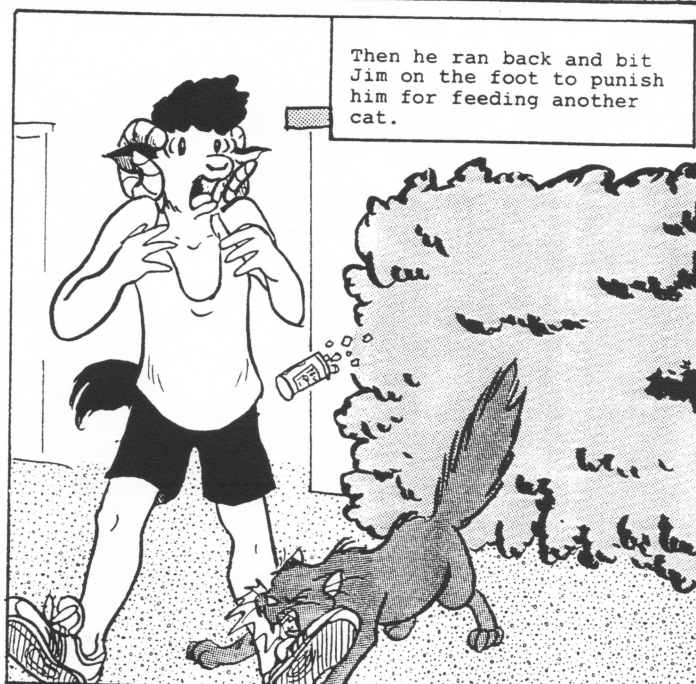
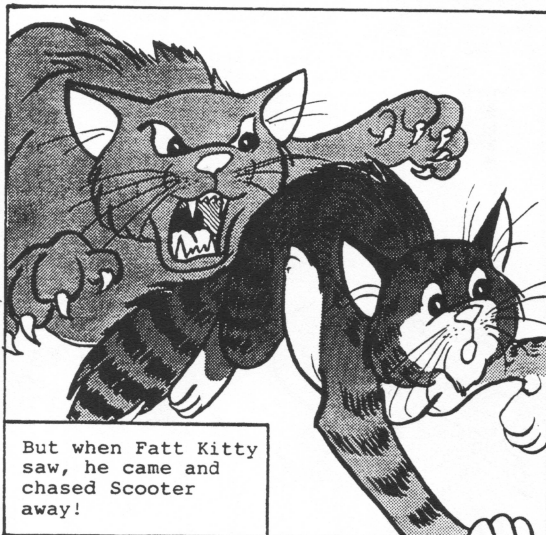
Jim (people pronounced it 'Jeem' behind his back) was also a CalArts animation student. He roomed with me, Jody and another girl last summer. He had many strange obsessions, foremost among them the TV show DYNASTY.

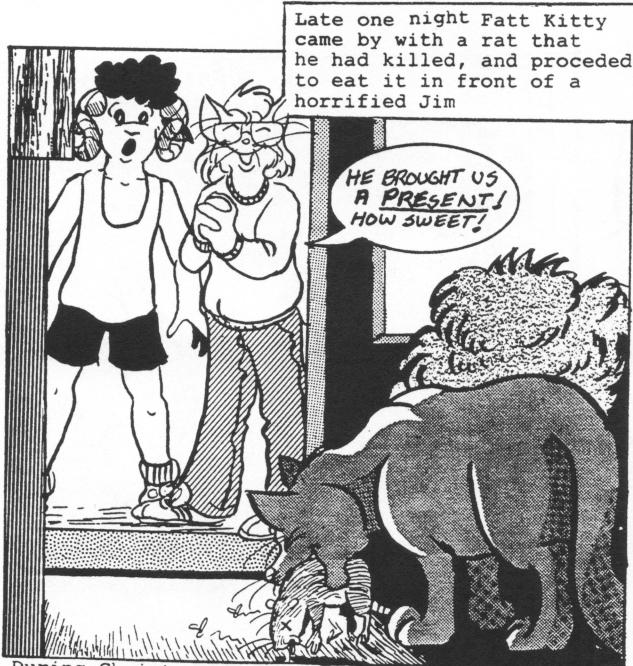


Jim was quite disgusted with the attention I lavished on Fatt Kitty, a large grey cat that belonged to an old lady who lived a couple condos down.



Despite that, Jim had a soft spot for cats. One day, tired of Fatt Kitty getting all the cat treats, he went down the row a ways to give some treats to another cat, Scooter.

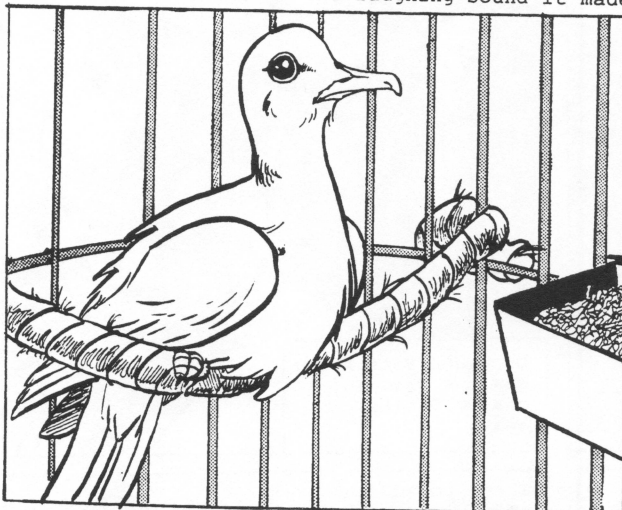




Late one night Fatt Kitty came by with a rat that he had killed, and proceeded to eat it in front of a horrified Jim

HE BROUGHT US A PRESENT!
HOW SWEET!

During Christmas Break, while we were still at school, another student gave Jody a white dove that he had found on the school grounds. Jim let us use an old cockatiel cage that he had, and we kept the dove with us when we moved into the condo that summer. The dove was quite tame and would sit on your finger. We named it 'Dr. HaHa', because of the laughing sound it made.



THIS IS THE MOST DISGUSTING THING I HAVE EVER SEEN! I AM SO GROSSED OUT! AND YOU LET THE KITTY LICK YOUR DINNER PLATE!

BUT I ONLY LET SCOOTER LICK IT, NOT FATT KITTY!

I DON'T CARE! SCOOTER PROBABLY EATS RATS TOO! I WILL NEVER TOUCH THE KITTY AGAIN! I WILL NOT LET THE KITTY IN AGAIN!! I CAN'T STAND IT!! AUGH!!

=MUNCH=
=CRUNCH=
=CRUNCH=

For some reason the dove liked Jim, and would coo or 'laugh' when he came in. Jim hated the dove to make noises around him. One day when he picked me up at work he greeted me with this line:

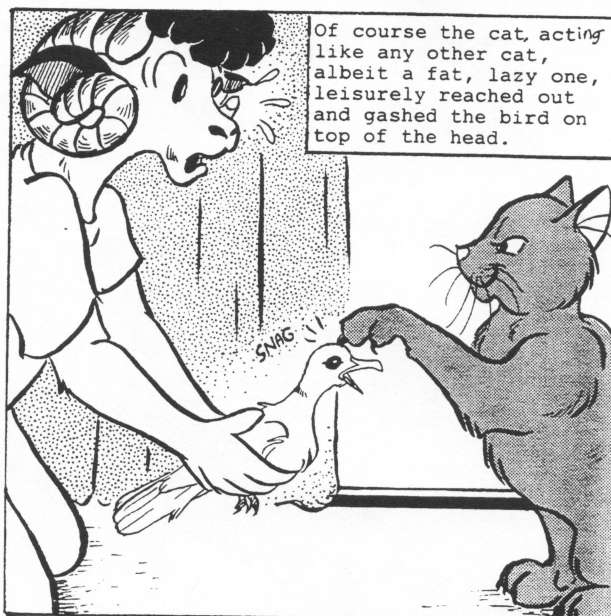


THAT DOVE LAUGHED 14 TIMES TODAY!!



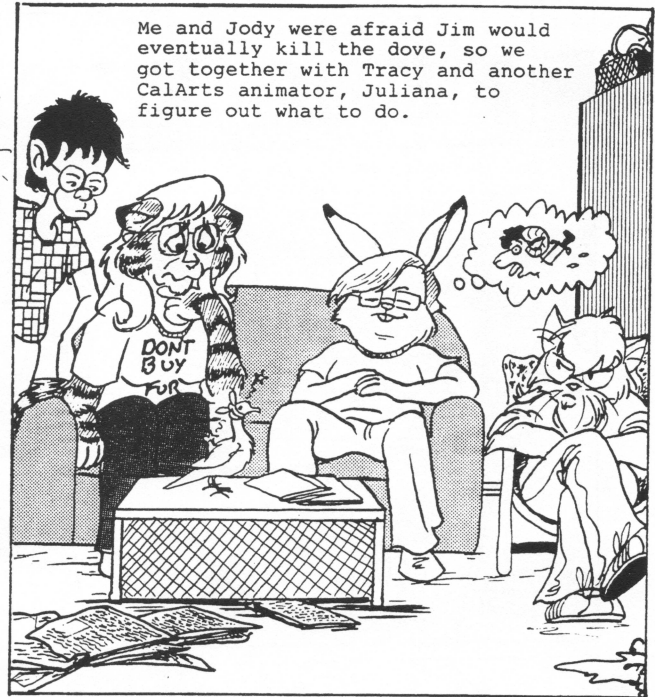
One day when I was at work and no one else was home, Jim decided to find out what would happen if he showed the dove to Fatt Kitty.

"The Devil finds work for idle hands" in action.



Of course the cat, acting like any other cat, albeit a fat, lazy one, leisurely reached out and gashed the bird on top of the head.

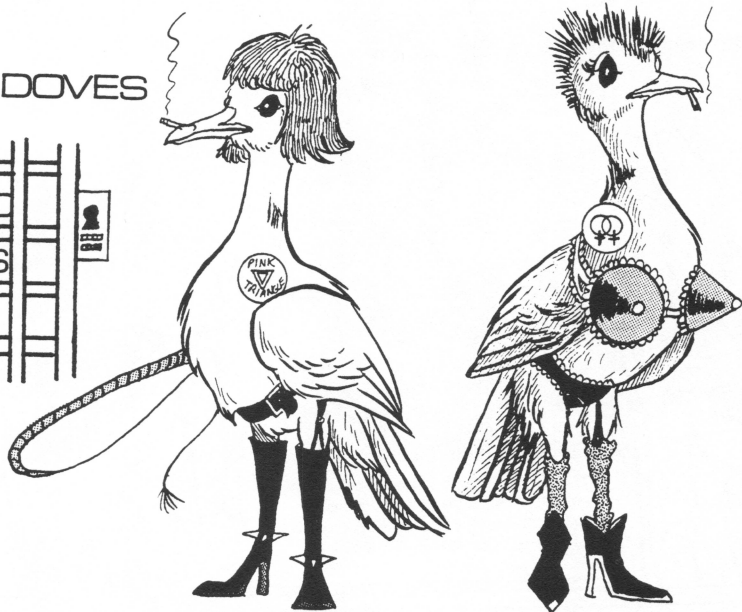
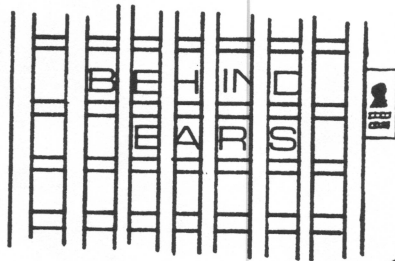
When he picked me up at work that day he admitted to me what he had done. Our fourth roomie, Angie, was in hysterics over it. I just got depressed.



Me and Jody were afraid Jim would eventually kill the dove, so we got together with Tracy and another CalArts animator, Juliana, to figure out what to do.

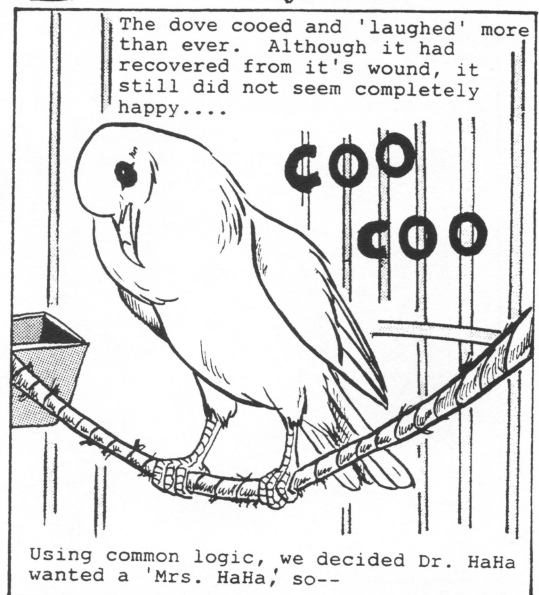
PART 3:

LESBIAN DOVES



Juliana offered to take custody of the dove until me and Jody moved out*, so soon after that we took it down to her place.

* SHE HAS SINCE TAKEN PERMANENT CUSTODY OF THE DOVE(S).

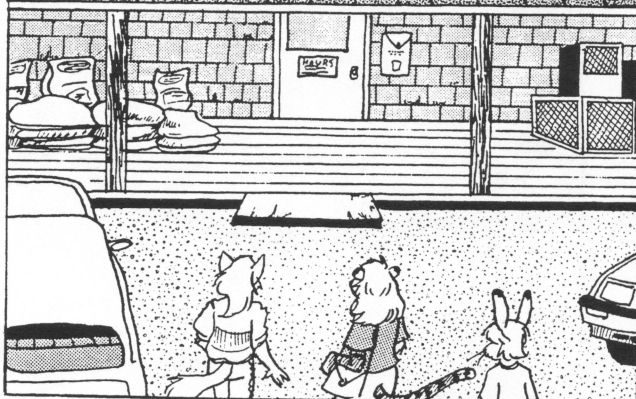


The dove cooed and 'laughed' more than ever. Although it had recovered from it's wound, it still did not seem completely happy....

Using common logic, we decided Dr. HaHa wanted a 'Mrs. HaHa', so--

CANYON COUNTRY FEED BIN

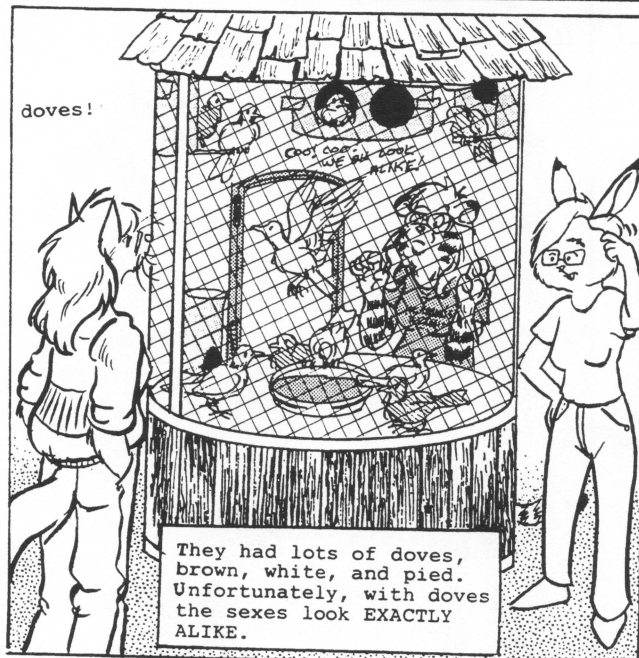
One Saturday me, Tracy and Juliana went to a store in Canyon Country that Juliana said had doves.



There were all sorts of neat animals there. There were different kinds of chickens, rabbits and pigeons, and we spent alot of time just looking around. They also had mice, rats, and, of course--



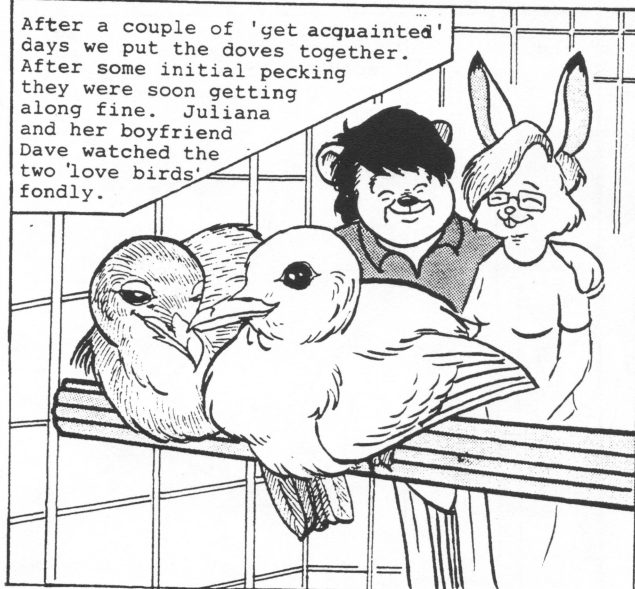
doves!



We couldn't find a female, but the owner picked one out and assured us that it was a girl. We also bought a bigger cage and a book about doves.

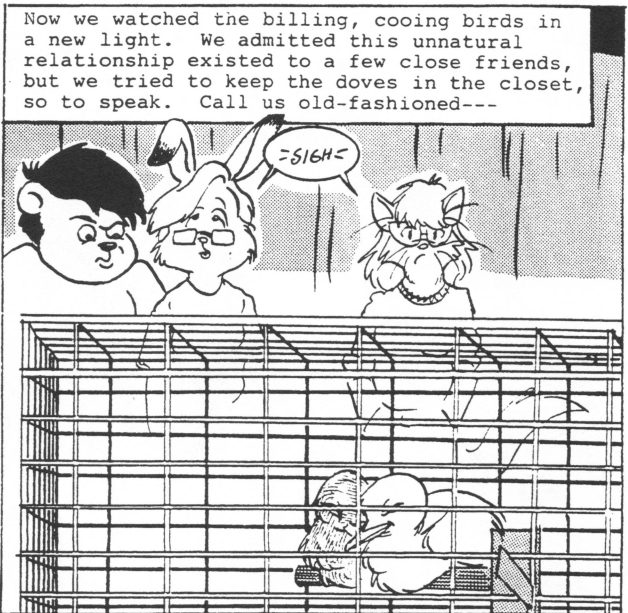
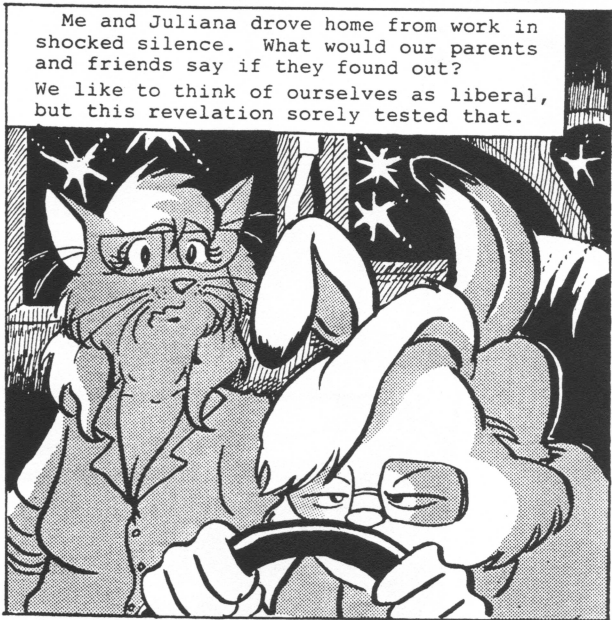
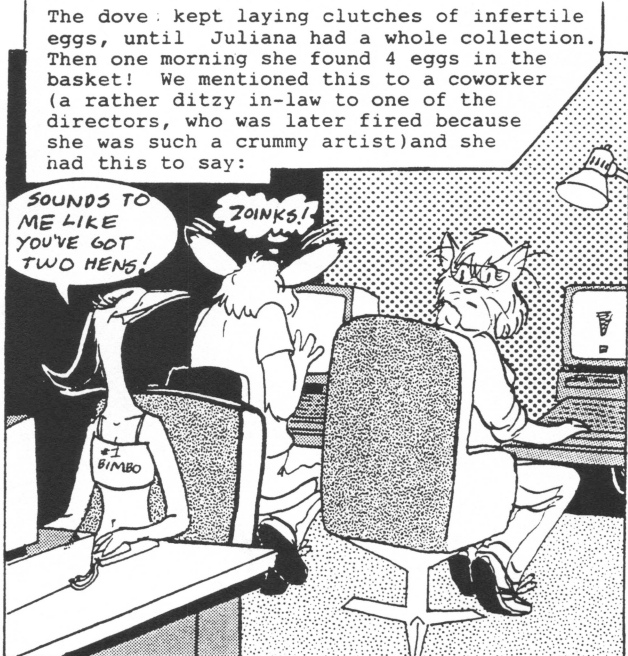


After a couple of 'get acquainted' days we put the doves together. After some initial pecking they were soon getting along fine. Juliana and her boyfriend Dave watched the two 'love birds' fondly.



Soon two eggs were laid in a small basket I had picked up for the occasion at Goodwill. The doves sat on the nest together. We thought it was the cutest thing we had ever seen.





* SEE ILLUSTRATION



MONIKA ©
FLA
89

The Lighthouse

by Watts Martin
illustrated by Zjonn

Chapter 3

When I awaken, I am alone. Faint voices drift down the staircase. I stand and stretch, my wingtips nearly brushing the room's walls, and look out the window. It is almost dark, the glow of sunset beginning to fade off the land's edge, and my right eye still sees as if I were holding a piece of blue-green glass in front of it. The left is almost back to normal. Almost.

This time I take the stairs.

Two wooden chairs face each other just to the left of the stairway, one placed against an outside wall, the other against the base of the light. John sits in one of them; in the other sits a male otter, perhaps four years older than I. His clothes are simple, light blue pants and vest over a white tunic—colors of the ministry. I don't remember which sect they represent, although I know it is neither Garanelt's nor Achoren's predominant one.

The priest looks up when I enter, rises to his feet. The hesitation before extending his hand is very slight. "You must be Revar," he says, his voice assured but quiet. "From what John tells me you've been doing good things for him."

I fold my arms across my chest without shaking his hand. "I haven't done very much for him at all."

He drops the hand after a moment, looking more amused than offended. "I think you've done more than you're aware of." He sits back down.

"Have I disturbed you?"

John looks up at me and smiles uneasily. "No, no." He sighs, turning away and staring at a point somewhere past the wall. "It isn't anything... you don't already know, ma'am. I just don't... understand...." His voice falters to a whisper.

"Whatever happened back then isn't your fault, John. Remember that." John nods; after a moment the priest continues. "We all have our burdens. Marilyn's was heavier than most. But you know she wasn't a criminal."

Depends on how you define *criminal*. As long as you don't think breaking the law has anything to do with it, no, she wasn't.

"She was a good person," John says. "But... I still don't see how she could be what... she was."

"We may never learn the reasons for it." The priest shifts in

his seat, the only sign of discomfort he has shown so far.

"I'm worried that I'll never see her again."

Of course you'll never see her again. She's dead.

"I'm sure you will—"

I can't listen to this. "I'll be downstairs," I say, trying to keep my voice from being too hard, and drop back down the stairwell.

Perhaps I am being too harsh, but for— What hurts him the most is believing that because Marilyn wasn't really a "good person" he won't see her again in the afterlife. This is what the Church of the Creator wants its followers to believe about their loved ones?

The moon reflects brightly off the rippling sea. I do not know how long I stand, watching it, before I hear the priest come up behind me.

"Thank you," he says.

I don't turn around. "For what?"

"Being there for him."

"I thought that was what you had come by for."

"It is. But you've probably helped more than I have."

"I set out to prove his wife innocent and ended up confirming her guilt. All I've helped do is ruin the time he has left." I sit on the ground, folding my wings around my knees. "It's a shitty way to pay back someone for saving your life."

"He would have learned the truth on his own. Without your presence, it would have been more painful."

I glance up at him. "Truth. You lied to him in there, didn't you?"

He kneels beside me. "How do you mean?"

"You told him that Marilyn would be there in your 'freedom.' But she won't be. Sinners don't get to collect on salvation, do they? They just go around another time."

"That depends on who you ask."

I laugh. "Wonderful. An objective worldview you have to interpret subjectively."

He smiles. "At least we believe you get another chance. There are a few sects that believe you only get one; if you fail, you receive eternal damnation."

"I thought the idea of a punishing Creator ran counter to your teachings."

"It does."

We lapse into silence.

"If you were in my position," the priest suddenly says, "would you have told John any different?"

"I wouldn't be in your position."

The otter raises his eyebrows, but says nothing, instead turning out toward the sea. "Tell me. Whose counsel do you take?"

"Just my own."

"It's very easy to go astray on that road."

"Perhaps." My claws find a small stone; I toss it into the water, watching it skip three times before sinking. "But at least I do my own travelling."

"I don't follow you."

"People talk about religions as narrow paths, difficult journeys. But that's not the way it is. Religions are carriages. People choose them so they can ride through life."

"Trading freedom for security." He rocks back off his knees, coming to rest cross-legged beside me. "A dim view of religion, don't you think?"

"An accurate one."

"For some people, perhaps."

"But not for you." I unfold my wings and turn to regard him. "Then you tell me. Why do you ride the carriage?"

"Because if I walk, I'll never get to where I should be." He smiles cryptically. "There's far less security than you think. Anyone who finds faith completely comfortable is missing something."

"There's a lot of people who would find that statement blasphemous."

The otter shrugs. "I follow my religion simply because I believe it's the truth."

"You don't *know* it's the truth?"

"If I told you I did, would it convince you of anything?"

I snort.

"Well, then." He spreads his hands.

"Have you ever killed anyone, priest?"

He blinks and shakes his head. "Have you?"

Darkness falls around us as the moon hides behind passing

clouds. "The first time I killed someone I was twelve years old.

"I had left home two weeks before, sick of everything my family stood for—slow death by stagnation. I didn't want to avoid other races, to live by hiding in trees and preying on farm animals. And the occasional farmer." The otter makes a slight gulping noise.

"I hadn't fed on blood since I left home. I didn't understand why eating 'normal' food wouldn't help me; after two weeks I was eating ravenously and starving to death. By the time I realized I needed blood again it was too late to leave the city. I was too weak to fly.

"I was sleeping in an alleyway. That morning I stayed up past sunrise and grabbed a human child as he walked past, probably on his way to school. He was smaller than I was, a few years younger." I close my eyes. "Sometimes I still see the boy's terrified expression as I wrench back his head and sink my teeth into his throat.

"Then the blood stopped flowing into my mouth. I pulled back and he was as white as chalk, his blue eyes frozen open, and I realized I had bled him dry. I was still thirsty."

I open my eyes again, controlling my breathing carefully. "That's the truth I believe, priest. Once I tasted that child's blood, he was already dead. I couldn't have stopped if I had wanted to. And you know something else? Bats have a preference for sapient prey. If I always acted according to nature, I'd go for the farmer instead of the farm animal every time.

"If I believed in your Creator, I'd hate him for making us the way he did. I'd blame him for the death of that child."

When I finish, the priest is looking at me with an expression that might be fear, or might be pity. Or both.

But when he finally speaks his voice is flatly neutral. "I don't believe blaming yourself is a better answer."

"I don't blame myself anymore. Perhaps I did for a while." The moon comes back into view, and my mood passes abruptly; I stand and flex my wings.

"Why sapient?" he asks after a moment.

"Because you're a perfect meal. You have so much blood that, as long as I feed regularly, I can use you without killing you. And you're easier to catch and hold than a wild animal half your size. It's something we just have to accept." I smile humorlessly.

The otter gazes out over the water, then shifts his position, looking uncomfortable. "A city seems like a dangerous home for you."

"I've tried the alternative."

"Leanthra?"

I laugh. "Chasing fairy tales isn't my calling. And besides, I prefer struggling in a place like this." In legends, Leanthra

is the home of the vampire bats. I am surprised the old tales are still told; we try to pointedly ignore them, as they do very little toward encouraging tolerance. What appeal the myths hold for us is not shared by other races. But then, I imagine tales of farm life hold much less charm if you happen to be a cow.

"All right, then. If you've accepted what you are, why so bitter?"

"The last priest I talked with, a long time ago, told me we were all paying for sins the first mortals committed at the beginning of time. Do you believe that?"

"In a sense."

"Then there would be no reason for hope except in your particular notion of life after death. Even I'm not that bitter." I walk into the lighthouse to check on John before leaving.

He smiles as I enter, looking slightly more cheerful. "I'm sorry I'm not much of a companion, ma'am." He shakes his head, indeed looking genuinely apologetic.

"Just worry about your light, John. And getting some rest tomorrow."

The bear eyes me. "You're sure you don't want to stay here?"

"Is this an invitation?" I say, flashing my best seductress smile (only passable at best, unless the target finds fangs attractive).

John starts and looks flustered, beginning to stutter.

"It's all right." I pat him on the arm. "I'm just teasing you. I have some work to do before sleeping. And you know I'm a night person."

He bites his lower lip. "What are you doing?"

"I'm not finished investigating what you've dragged me into. You've made me into a detective, you know."

"I don't rightly know what more needs to be found," he says, sighing.

"Marilyn's fence. The records she kept, that might be the key to breaking up the rest of the pirate ring."

"A reason for her being a...." He looks away. "You know."

Other than pure greed? "Maybe." And maybe it's true, too. There are many unanswered questions. Good woman or not, Marilyn Brown was playing a complex game with her life. "If I can, I will find out."

"Thank you." John heaves a great sigh.

I hug John, pressing myself into his great warm bulk, almost having to climb up him to plant a kiss on his nose before leaving.

I fly back to my hostel room, gathering my belongings and checking out; now that Wortham knows its location, it's no longer safe.

Another five minutes to check into a different hostel in a different part of town, and I'm free to fly to the Guard station. If I am to work with them, I'm going to damn well get their cooperation. The clerk at the front desk, however, does not see things my way.

"I can't give you those records," he repeats.

"You have to give me something, dammit!"

The small squirrel pushes his glasses back up his muzzle. "I really suggest you leave the investigating to us."

"You were the ones who *suggested* I help you."

"I have no record of civilian assistance on this case."

"Maybe the officer hasn't finished cutting all the red tape yet."

"What was the officer's name again?"

"I don't know." I drum my claws on the counter. "He was a stoat. He was the one who went out to the lighthouse earlier today."

"Mmm-hmmm." He frowns and riffles papers. "And why was your assistance required?"

"Maybe you need someone whose idea of undercover surveillance isn't standing at attention in a black suit instead of a red uniform."

This earns me a disapproving glance through the glasses.

"Can I talk to the investigating officer?"

"He's not on duty right now."

Of course not. "What about the former investigating officer?"

"Excuse me?"

"The stoat probably hadn't entered your academy ten years ago. Who was investigating the pirates then?"

"I can't confirm that we were investigating any piracy then, ma'am."

"You already have, you idiot!" I snap, sinking both sets of claws deep into the wooden countertop. He tries not to glance down at the gashes I am making, but his eyes keep flicking back and forth between them and his precious papers. "Have you talked with the guy who was doing his job—or if he was like you, not doing it—ten years ago?"

"If there was someone investigating it then, all his reports would be on file now."

"So the answer is no."

"I didn't say that."

"Would you give me his name?"

Riffle, riffle, riffle. "I can't do that."

I rake my claws across the counter, gouging half-inch deep lines into its surface. He pushes his glasses up again and steps back, muttering something under his breath. "Are you sure?" I inquire sweetly.

"Your actions could be construed as threatening, ma'am," he sputters.

"I can't confirm I was threatening you. Sir." Smile. I can read your eyes: you're afraid to call my bluff. Knowing I couldn't get away doesn't mean anything to you; you're too frightened about how much I can do before getting caught. Yes, study what my claws are doing to your counter a bit more. Think about how hard wood is compared to, say, your body.

He clears his throat loudly. "The officer in question is retired."

"That's nice. Could you give me the retired gentleman's name?"

Riffle, riffle, riffle.

Leaning toward him over the counter, I smile broadly, flashing many teeth as possible. "What time do you get off work today?" Yes, stare at my fangs. Am I close to triggering your flight reflex yet?

"Why do you ask?"

"Just say I find squirrels..." I clench the fist that rests on the counter and pull upward, then drop finger-sized chunks of wood across the papers. "...cute."

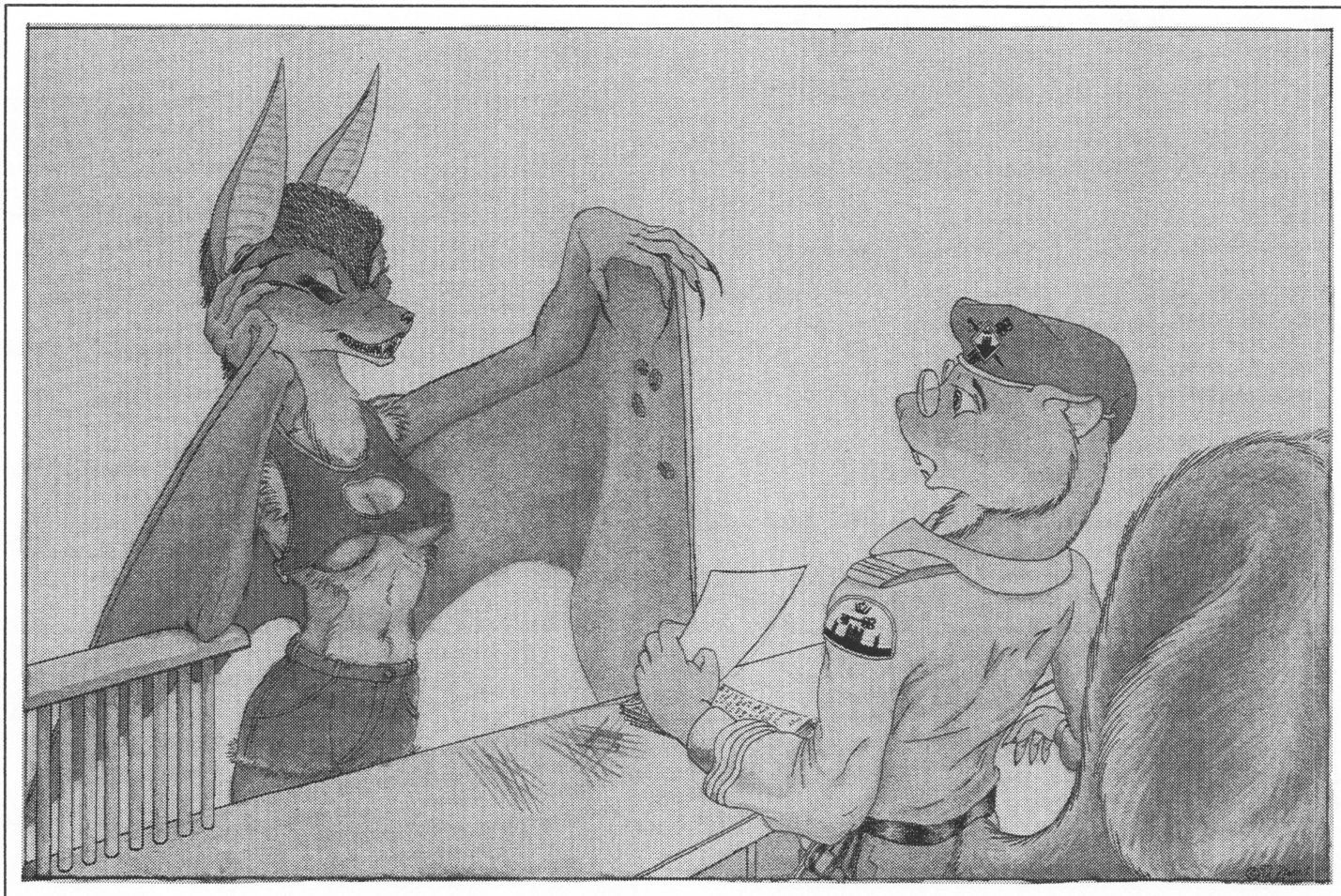
The clerk stares at me, shaking the papers out and setting them down on the counter. "That's very flattering," he squeaks. "Hold on." He bolts to a desk on the far side of the room and speaks with a short, fat human woman.

When he returns, he makes a show of cleaning his glasses, as if to prove my presence is not the least worrisome. "Captain Monthril confirms," he finally begins, "that I don't have the authority to give you any of these records."

Idiot! "I don't want the damn records!" I realize I am screaming loud enough that other Guards are looking over at us, but I'm too angry to calm down. "I want the name of the man who investigated the pirates ten years ago!"

The clerk has retreated back five feet. "Why?"

"Because maybe he's the one Guard in history who's had a fucking clue, you pathetic bucktoothed moron! Keep your damn papers



and just TELL ME WHO HE IS!"

The fat woman has walked up to the counter now; the clerk is hiding behind her. "I don't think I like your attitude," she says softly.

"That's because it's not a very nice one," I growl. "You people have forced me to do this. Give me enough access to let me start."

"Then come back during business hours and ask for Michael Barden. He's the officer assigned to the case. Without his authorization, we can't help you."

"Dammit, I need—"

She turns away. "If you leave now, we won't charge you for the desk."

Assholes. A small fox tries to say something pleasant to me as I storm past him; I pick him up with one hand and throw him into a chair. No one else comes within ten feet of me as I stomp out of the station.

I don't know what time it is, but the bars have got to still be open. I head back to the bar I was at a day ago. Or a few days ago, perhaps. I'm less surprised at my loss of time sense than at the fact that it simply doesn't matter to me anymore.

Unlike my last visit, the bar is almost deserted. A few humans are half-melted into the shadows around the walls; the bartender is the elderly fat human I saw on my first visit, before I had met John. Before I had gotten myself involved with all this. —Friendship be damned, but I wish I had never seen that old bear. I could just crawl back into my bottle and feed on other drunks until....

Until what?

"What'll it be?" the fat man says, turning toward me. He grips a cigar tiredly in his right hand, regarding me unconcernedly from half-lidded brown eyes.

"Bourbon. Straight."

He nods and sticks the cigar back in his mouth, then ducks down to get a glass and bottle. "Have I seen you in here before?"

"Once before. You weren't here on my last visit." I watch him as he moves. I've never really liked humans; they're too soft, too weak. And by a cruel trick of fate, they have absolutely delicious blood. Perhaps I don't normally like humans because, of all sapient species, they're the ones bats are most likely to look at and think *prey*.

"We don't get many bats in here," he says, straightening up and pouring my drink.

If this is the setup line for a bad joke, there's going to be one less fat human in the world. "There probably aren't that many bats in Raneadhros."

He nods. "Counting yourself, I believe that makes six.

More than most cities."

"Six," I repeat. "You've counted?"

"Not officially. Everyone seems to wander through here at least once, that's all."

"In a city of over a million beings, I doubt many of them have come to this bar."

"Of course not. You run into the one who hasn't, send him my way." He blows an intricate purple smoke ring and regards me seriously for a moment, then waddles over to the far end of the bar.

I'm halfway finished with my drink when he comes back. "Anything else?"

"Tell me where Marilyn Brown kept her records. Tell me what's so goddamn important about them that the Guard needs a convict's help to get them, and pirates are ready to kill to get them first."

"John Brown's wife?"

What? I look up, focusing on him for the first time since he returned. He wears the same, immovably bored expression I've always seen him with. "Yes. You know him?"

He shrugs. "Not really. You interested in talking about this?"

"To a bartender?"

"It's what I pay myself to do." He blows another smoke ring.

What the hell. I outline the entire story. "So here I am, trying to solve a ten-year-old mystery before I get thrown back in jail after someone died getting me out last time."

The bartender purses his lips and lets out a long breath. "Ten years ago I wasn't running a bar."

"Were you a pirate?"

"No. A wizard." He raises his eyebrows and smiles slightly.

"Good for you." A less likely wizard I'll probably never meet. I drain my glass and push it toward him.

As he refills it, he says, "You're a fairly angry young woman."

"Wouldn't you be?"

"I'd be upset, yes. But when I got through it, my anger would pass. Will yours?"

I stare into the glass. "I don't know."

He nods, then shrugs. "What you need to do is find someone who can lead you to the records."

"The Guard who was doing this ten years ago—he's my only shot at that. I think everybody else is dead."

"From what you said there are a hell of a lot of live people looking for these records. See if any of them are doing more

than quacking in the dark." Another smoke ring, and he wanders off again.

"I know you," a voice says from behind me.

"Soup," I say without turning around.

"Turtle," he corrects me, bouncing into the chair by my side.

I finish my drink and slam it on the counter. "Take care that it doesn't change." I get up to leave.

"Wait a minute," he says. "I remember what I was trying to tell you. See, I've never actually seen the guy, I've just heard about him third-hand. I mean, he's been in this bar, but not when I've been here, and it was only mentioned to me and I don't really remember the name."

"That's nice." I start walking toward the door.

"There's someone looking for you," he calls, bouncing toward me. "Say, are you in a bad mood?"

"Yes," I say. "Who is it?"

"I don't remember the name. Did you practice a lot with a mirror to get that scowl?"

"Wortham?"

"Doesn't sound right. Is that a first name? Try first names."

"Shit," I mutter. How many people do I have first names of in this city? "John. Cayne. Michael."

"Michael," he says, nodding sharply. "Michael is looking for you, and—"

"The damned stoat can wait until morning." I gather my cloak around me and step outside, shutting the door on the reptile's puzzled face.

Should I go back to the lighthouse? For all I know someone's trying to kill John even as I walk down this stained, near-deserted street.

I don't want to go back. I want to fly to a different city and forget all of this.

That thought keeps echoing in my mind as I fly back toward Weryse Point.

• • •

As I walk up to the lighthouse, I hear noises from downstairs, even though John is surely up in the top tending the light; the front door is wide open. This is becoming tiresome.

Of course, I see him before he sees me. It's the fox who was here yesterday, sitting on the bed, his back toward me; he doesn't appear to be doing anything except... sitting. I can hear John's breathing from upstairs, smell his cherished onion rings being fried. For the moment, he is safe.

Marn. That's your name. What the hell are you doing here, Marn? Ah. The desk has been opened; a picture has been moved from the wall. He's trying to conduct a thorough, unimpeded search of the premises. Let's see if I can impede him a bit.

As quietly as I can, I walk in the room and sit on the edge of the bed, carefully, slowly, not making a noise, not jarring the fox at all.

"Fuckin' Wortham," he is muttering under his breath. "Fuckin' bear doesn't know anything. There's nothing that's fuckin' here." There is an odd smell coming from him, not just sweat and misery but... something else. Perfume? No, but something that smells strong and cleanly pleasant.

Marn sighs and drums his hands on his knees, then turns around, scanning the room. Just as his eyes meet mine, before he has a chance to react to my presence by doing anything more than sucking in his breath, I lean forward and say, very brightly, "Boo!"

He screams.

I cut it off abruptly by clapping a hand over his mouth, pushing him back down on the bed and straddling him. "If you scream, I'll kill you," I say, locking eyes with him. "I might kill you anyway. But if you scream I'm going to kill you slowly. Understand?"

He nods, and I remove the hand. "Now," I continue. "You're looking for Marilyn Brown's records."

"Yes," he gets out, beginning to shake violently.

"Don't wet your pants again, tough guy." I start frisking him with one hand, tossing aside two knives, a switchblade and the ever-popular boot dagger. "I'm going to let you up now. If you run for the door, or make a move toward a weapon, or do anything I find objectionable at all, I'm going to grab your stomach with one hand and pull up. Do you know what that'll do to you?"

"Gut me."

I nod. "Don't make me do that, Marn. Cleanup is hell." I let go of him and sit on the bed. He makes no move to sit up. Well, that's fine with me.

"All right. Cayne Wortham sent you."

He nods.

I watch his eyes; he's calculating whether he can disable me before I can really gut him. And whether I'm really enough of a bitch to do it. Perhaps not so much of a yoyo after all; more's the pity. If he's not incompetent, it makes him a threat. "Why does Wortham think the records are here?"

"I don't know. Because of the bear, I think."

"But you don't think the bear knows anything."

He shakes his head.

"You know that he didn't become the lighthouse operator until after his wife's death?"

The fox looks blank.

"That means she never lived here. How could she have hidden the records here?"

"I don't know."

"Does Wortham?"

"I don't ask." He rolls over. "They're going to kill me."

"Because you can't find anything?"

"Because I gave you Cayne's name."

"He's worried about me, is he?"

"He wants you dead."

I narrow my eyes. "So you were going to get back into his good graces by killing me."

"No!" he says, backing away from me on the bed.

"You're a hell of a sorry excuse for a pirate. You're supposed to fight to the death. When I grabbed you, you should have hit me. You should have pulled out one of those weapons and stabbed me."

"I didn't think I was fast enough."

"You're not. You know what your problem is? You're scared of dying. A sense of self-preservation is good. But you have a genuine fear of death."

"Let me tell you something, Marn. If you walk out that door, you're not going to last until morning. You were hoping I'd be here sleeping and you could bury a knife in my back."

"But you made the ultimate mistake for a thug. You got caught. So you have three choices. Try and kill me now, leave with nothing and get killed by Wortham, or help me."

He sits up on the bed, staring at me and breathing heavily. "What do you want?"

"The same as you. I want to know where the records are."

"I told you I don't know."

"Well, tell me everything you do know."

"But—"

I spring forward, my teeth in his face. "Look, stupid," I hiss, "the only chance you have is talking and then praying to whatever gods you believe in that your pirate ring gets put out of commission before they get to you. With my help, your chances are just piss-poor. Without it you'll have a knife in your gut by sunrise." The peculiar smell is stronger up close.

"But I don't know anything," he says, his expression horrified. He looks down at his chest, then back up at me. "It has

something to do with George."

"Who the hell is George?"

"Her fence. The guy she worked for."

"Wortham's predecessor. What happened to him?"

"I don't know. I swear to God I don't."

I nod. "All right. You're going to spend the night with me," I say, standing up and pulling him to his feet.

"What?"

"It's the only way I'm going to keep you safe." I gather up his weapons and take him by one hand, yanking him through the door. "Remember, dear, try anything and you'll be spilling your guts in a much more literal sense."

When we are outside I toss all his weapons into the water. He makes a soft moaning noise as they sink, looking back wistfully at them until the lighthouse is out of sight.

When we are in the room, I lock it and walk over to my bag. There's a rope in here somewhere—

I hear his charge before he reaches me, almost leaping out of the way. Almost. He slams me into the wall, and the few colors I have left in my right eye go black momentarily.

Before I turn around he slams into me again, crushing me against the wall. Oh, you're a stupid, arrogant bat sometimes. You already knew he was thinking about killing you from behind, and you turned your back on him. Claws and teeth don't mean very much when

Ow—

someone keeps smashing your

Ohh—

face into a wall.

The next blow is in the small of my back, and I feel the wall slide up past my nose as I fall to the floor, my entire rib cage feeling flat as a parchment.

He flips me over and gets both hands around my neck. I can see his face as he starts to strangle me; he's still more scared than I am. This is good. It makes him a very bad assassin. Maybe I won't have to kill him—although part of me wants to do it now more than ever.

Suddenly I know what the smell is. If I had enough breath, I'd laugh.

Of course, as his hands tighten around my neck, he's already made his mistake. If he had had the sense to just stomp up and down on my chest a few times, I'd be dead. My hollow rib bones would have splintered through my lungs. I rest my hands on his arms and try to catch my breath to regain strength.

You're not going to catch your breath, idiot. He's *strangling* you. Oh, right. I grip his arms and force them apart, not

nearly as easily as I should be able to; it takes almost all my remaining strength to pull up, forward and smash his head into the wall.

I stand up, my breath coming in great, ragged gasps; Marn moans and manages to get to his knees, holding his head in his hands. Oh, come off it, you crybaby. It isn't even bleeding.

By the time he stands up, my breathing is almost normal. I grab his neck in one hand, his left thigh in the other, and lift him over my head. "One chance is all you get, little boy." I turn and hurl him into the far wall. He meets it with a pleasant crunching noise.

I finish catching my breath, then walk toward my bag and get the rope out. When I roll him over and bind his arms and legs, he is still too weak to resist. His nose is bleeding; by morning, most of his front will have bruises visible through his fur. I didn't throw him hard enough to cause any internal damage. I don't think.

I prop him up on one side of the thin mattress, back against the wall, and sit facing him. "You know," I tell him conversationally, "the first time we met, I was thinking about ripping out your throat. Just digging in one claw right here—" I tap the side of his neck— "and pulling across slowly. The last thing you'd see would be me drinking from a foot-high fountain of your blood."

Marn starts whining as the image forms in his mind. It's a bit graphic even for my taste, but the more he thinks of me as a virtually immortal demoness, the more control I'll have over him.

"All right," I say, "Get two things straight. One, it's probably not wise for you to do things like trying to kill me. It just encourages me to come up with creative ways of torturing you to death. And honestly, I don't like thinking about those things. It's a part of me that I'm not fond of."

I make a quick move toward his neck with one claw; he pulls away, screaming, but I only pull off the necklace he is wearing under his shirt. "And two, I already told you. I'm a vampire bat. Not a vampire." I pull off one of the garlic cloves and pop it into my mouth, tossing the rest into his lap.

"I want you to help me go looking for those records to try and bust up your ring, not preserve it, and for that I need to know that even if you won't protect my back, you won't stab it."

"I won't," he whispers.

I pick up another clove of garlic and pop it into my mouth, chewing loudly. "I'm still very angry at you, Marn. If I don't kill you...." I pick up another clove of garlic and bite into it. "Sine I can't seem to convince you that helping me is the ethically correct course of action, I'm going to have to rely on mortal terror."

"You're not gonna kill me?"

Placing my claws on his shoulders, I sit in his lap, throwing the garlic onto the floor, and touch my nose to his. "I never said that, did I?"

He whimpers.

"I asked you a question," I say gently, spearing my thumb claws into his shoulder.

"No," he yelps.

"There's nobody on either side of us. You can scream as loud as you like without waking up anyone," I assure him. I'm not really sure this is true, but considering the noise we were making a few minutes ago, if there was someone to wake up we'd have done it already.

"What are you gonna do?" he says, squirming down away from me.

I laugh. "You're not just afraid of death. You're afraid of pain."

He gulps and shrinks in on himself, his eyes widening even further.

"Tomorrow, we're going to visit the Guard, and then we're going to find out who George is. Even if you have to take me to Wortham and I have to beat it out of him.

"But I'm not going to go to sleep just yet. Garlic makes me... thirsty." I bare my teeth and trace my nose slowly across his mouth down toward his neck.

He begins screaming long before my fangs sink into his flesh.

I barely puncture the surface, letting little more than a trickle into my mouth, but from the noise he makes you'd think I really had ripped his throat out.

Long ago bats supposedly picked unfortunates as their personal parlors, carrying them off and drinking from them each night until the victim died of blood loss or starvation. I've always found the idea horrific, one of the many cruelties ascribed to bats I hope is mere legend. But as I lick the last drops from his fur, I hope it's a legend he's thinking about right now.

"You *do* have nice blood, Marn," I say, climbing off his lap and stretching out on the mattress near him. He is sobbing loudly.

When I turn out the light and lock my wings around me, preparing for sleep, he is still sobbing. Should I feel guilty about what I'm doing to him? After what he's tried to do to me?

I don't think so. But perhaps the fact that I still do is, after all, a good sign.

...to be concluded later this issue...

Interlude 3

"So how long are you going to be staying with me?"

"Until you throw me out." I grinned weakly. Wezip laughed, shaking his head.

Jack's friend, another fox, was an interesting sort. Although as far as I could tell, he spent most of his waking hours in this pub.

"So," he continued, "tomorrow'll be your first full day in Raneadhros. What do you plan to do with it?"

"I don't know, really. Take my portfolio over to Greene Galleries. Then go looking for a job."

"Maybe you can get somethin' that involves art."

"Like?"

"Drafting. Signmaking."

"Please, don't say 'printing.'"

Jack cleared his throat. "I don't suppose you've seen a vampire bat around here, have you?"

Wezip's eyes widened, and he looked across me at the other fox. "No. Should I have?"

Jack shrugged.

The human bartender looked up when he spoke. "There was one in here last night."

"Really?" I leaned forward, the nervousness about going to Greene tomorrow forgotten. "Female?"

He nodded. "Don't ask me for a description, though. Only time she's been in here, and she spent it all in a booth in the corner."

"Did you get her name?"

That earned me a sarcastic look. "I'm a bartender, son, not a social register."

"What are you going to say to her if you find her?"

"Well." I took a drink. "I'm going to say... I'm...." I dropped my head on the counter. "I don't have the slightest idea."

"If you don't mind me asking," Wezip said suddenly, "what the hell are you two going on about?"

"The bat in question is a woman I met and... fell in love with. Although we weren't lovers."

"Right," Wezip said.

"Anyway, she was put in jail wrongly--"

"She didn't do it?"

"Oh, yes, she did."

The fox raised his eyebrows, then nodded uncertainly.

"And she was dying. They weren't feeding her blood. Well, the upshot of all this is I saved her life, but she thinks I died in the process."

"That's what the bandage is from?"

"Oh. Yes." I reached up and pulled it off, flinching a little as fur stuck to the adhesive. "How's it look?"

"Not too bad," Jack said. "Although people will notice it."

"So she thinks she killed you." Wezip looked thoughtful.

As we sat there, a mouse stomped up to the bar. I'd never seen a mouse that could really stomp before, especially a female one, but then again I'd never seen a mouse five inches taller than I was, either.

She looked over at me as I gaped, and I turned away hurriedly.

"That's Murr," Wezip said. "Best built mouse in Ranea."

"Watch it, fox," she said, her voice startlingly low, but not unpleasant.

"I'd rather watch you."

The bartender had already set a drink in front of her. "God." She took a huge swig. "One of the docks collapsed an hour ago."

"Anyone hurt?" the barkeep said.

"Damned if I know. And Wezip, I'm keeping track of where your hand is. Mind you do the same."

"So what am I going to say to Revar if--when--I find her?" I suddenly said to Jack. Murr gazed at me, eyebrows raised.

"Story of lost love," Wezip said. "Very tragic. But, we hope, with a happy ending."

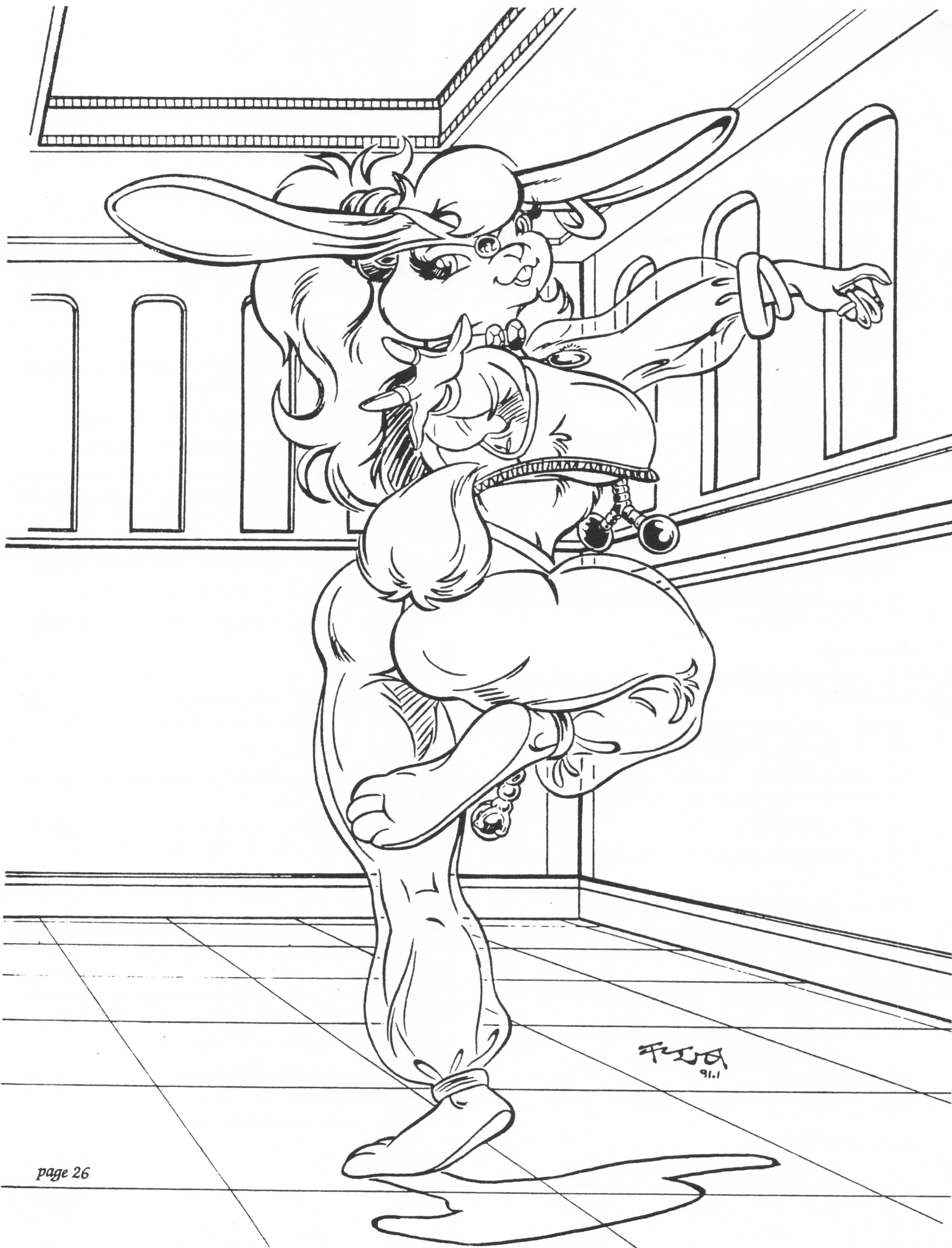
Evidently he had moved his hand somewhere Murr didn't like; the next instant she had his arm out flat on the counter. "Ow!" Wezip said.

"If you do that again, dear, the happy ending will be the barbarian mouse making a fox-tooth necklace," she said, letting him go.

"She likes me," Wezip said, rubbing his arm.

Murr closed her eyes and sighed, then looked at me inquiringly. "So what is your tragic story?"

I took a deep breath and started over again.



EMPIRES



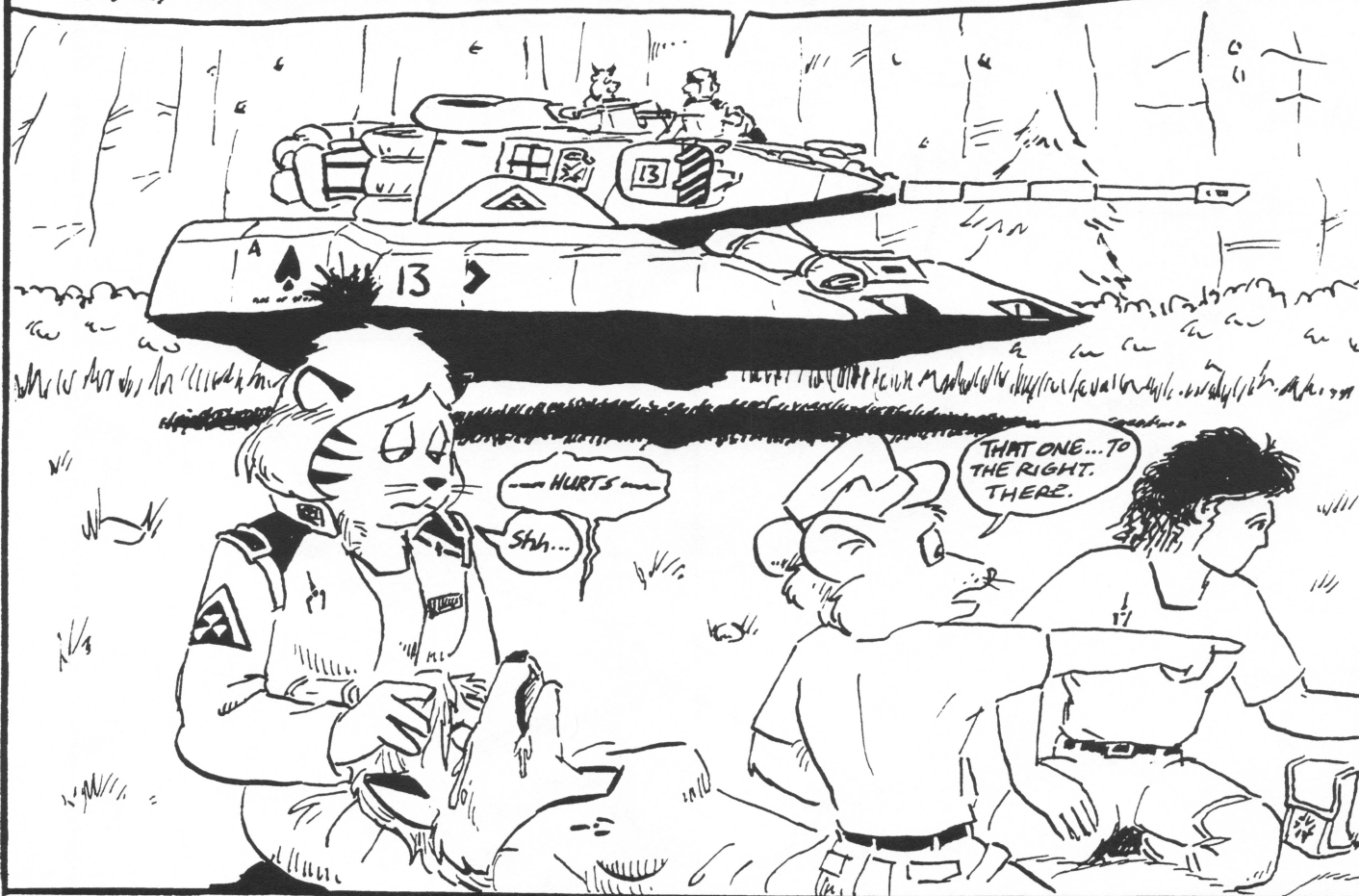
Story & Art
Chris Grant

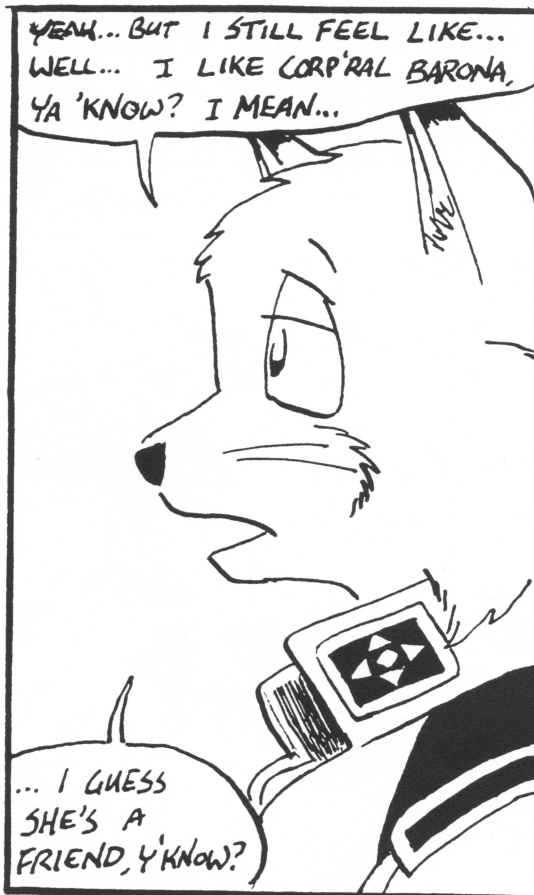
Inked by
Jimmy "me and
my big mouth"
Chin

I DUNNO... SOMETHING,
AT LEAST...

TOMAC.. I VIEWED THE VEHICLE RECORDERS. THE WHOLE
INCIDENT IS ON CHIP. IF YOU'D LEFT THE SPADE THE
SAME TIME THE PUSHING & SHOVING STARTED...

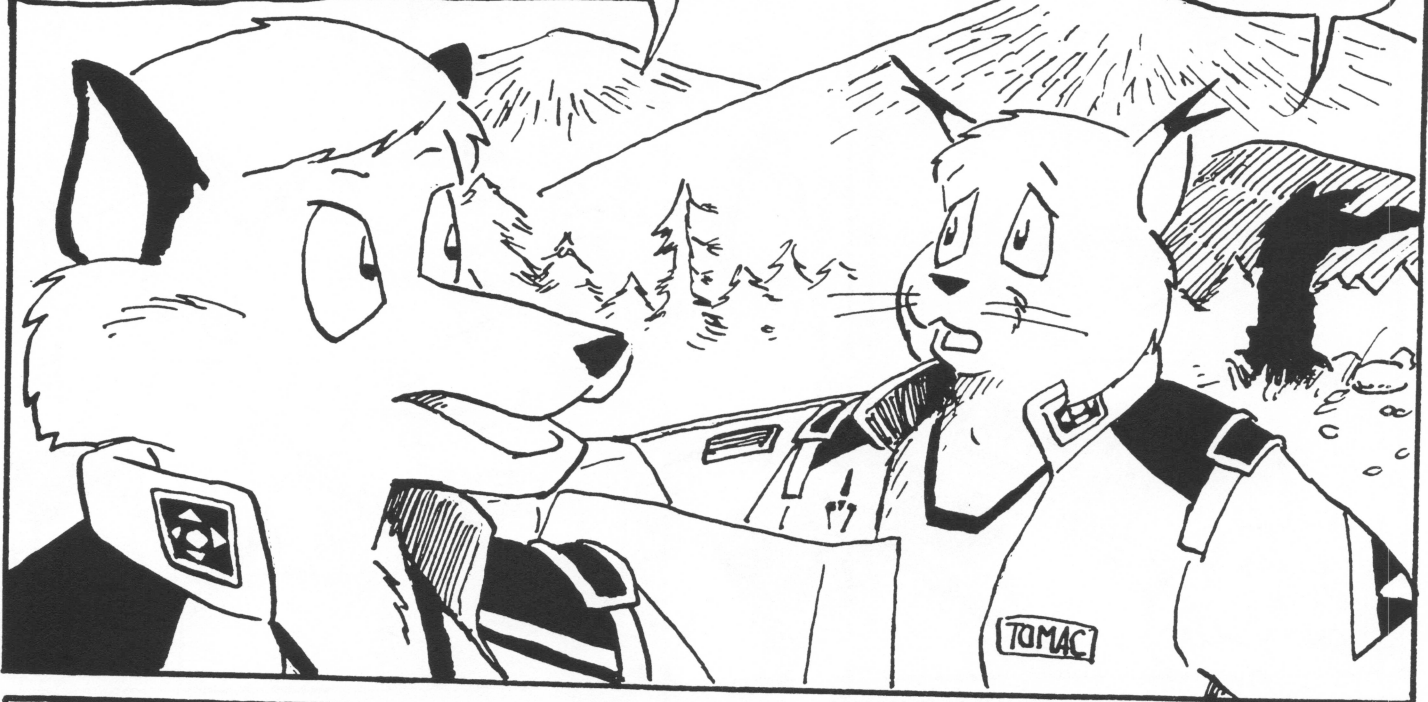
... YOU WOULDN'T HAVE GOTTEN THERE IN TIME. SO DON'T TORTURE YOURSELF. IT WAS ALL
OVER, AND THE RESULTS WOULD HAVE BEEN... BASICALLY THE SAME





TOMAC... YOU WERE WATCHING THE SENSORS, I WAS AT THE SPADE'S GUNS. SERGEANT CHENNAULT WAS AT THE EIGHTBALL'S GUNS. SHADDOCK AND KHASHIN WERE ON RECON. WE WERE ALL DOING OUR JOBS-- LOOKING FOR AN ENEMY COMING FOR US FROM OUTSIDE. NOBODY WAS LOOKING FOR ANY PROBLEMS WITHIN THE PERIMETER, OKAY?

YESSIR, BUT...



BUT NOTHING. THE ONLY ONE THAT FAILED US WAS NILE. CASE CLOSED, PRIVATE

"YES, SIR..."

I NEED A BLASTER PISTOL. ANY EXTRAS?

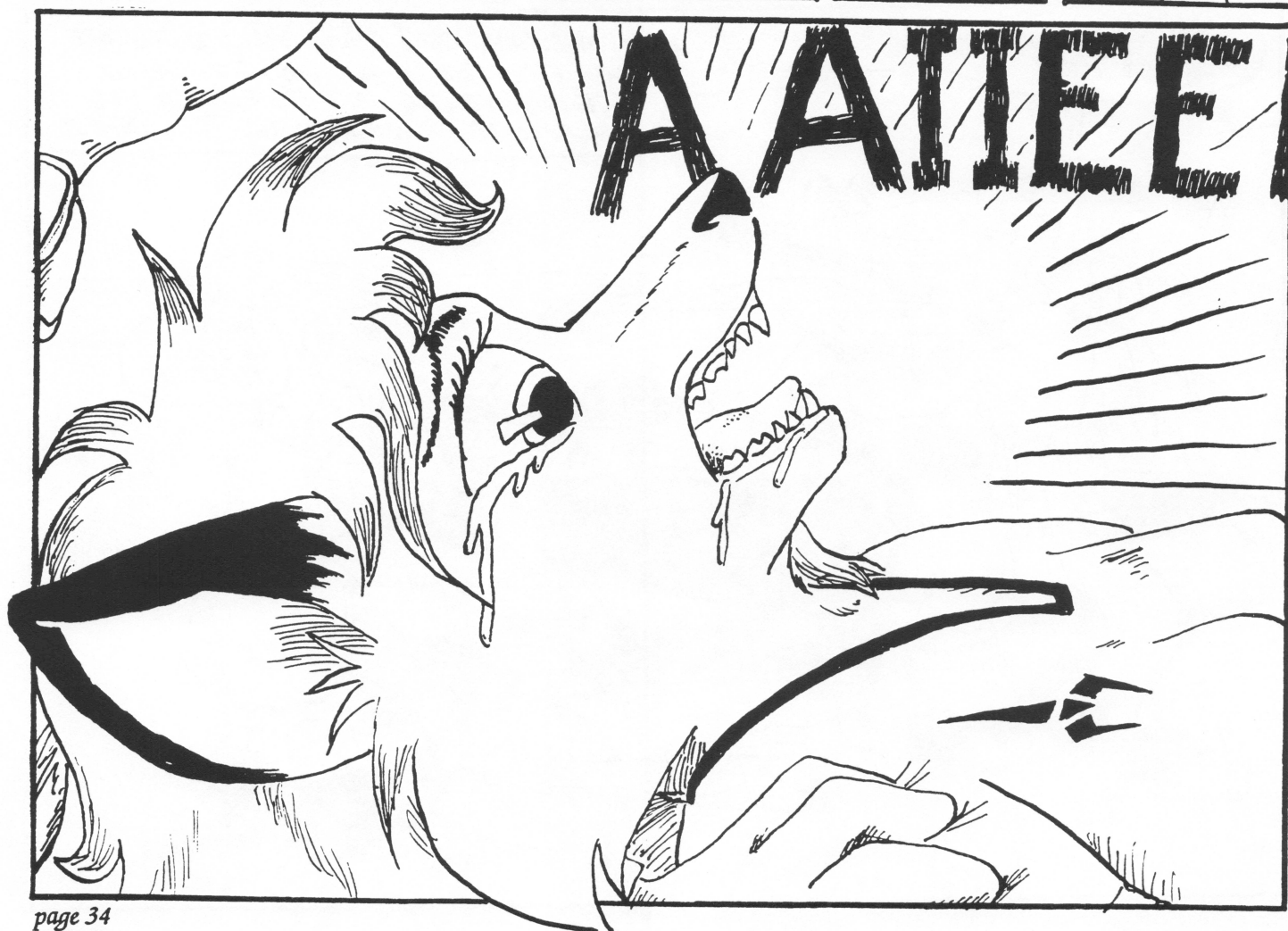
NILE'S... SHE DOESN'T NEED HERS... BUT WHAT DO YOU NEED...?



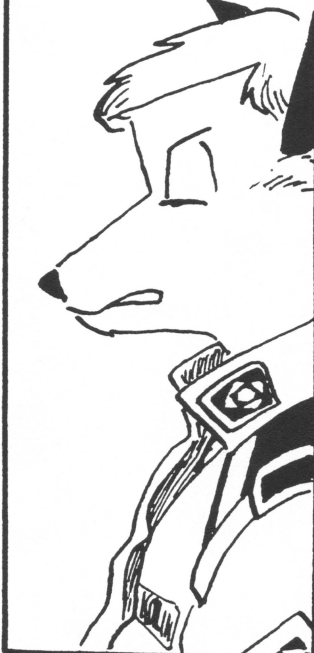
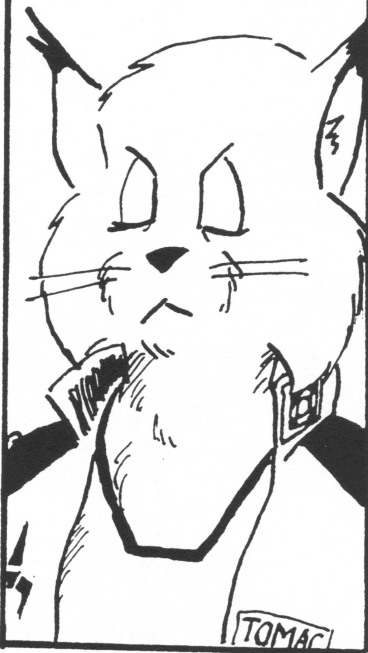




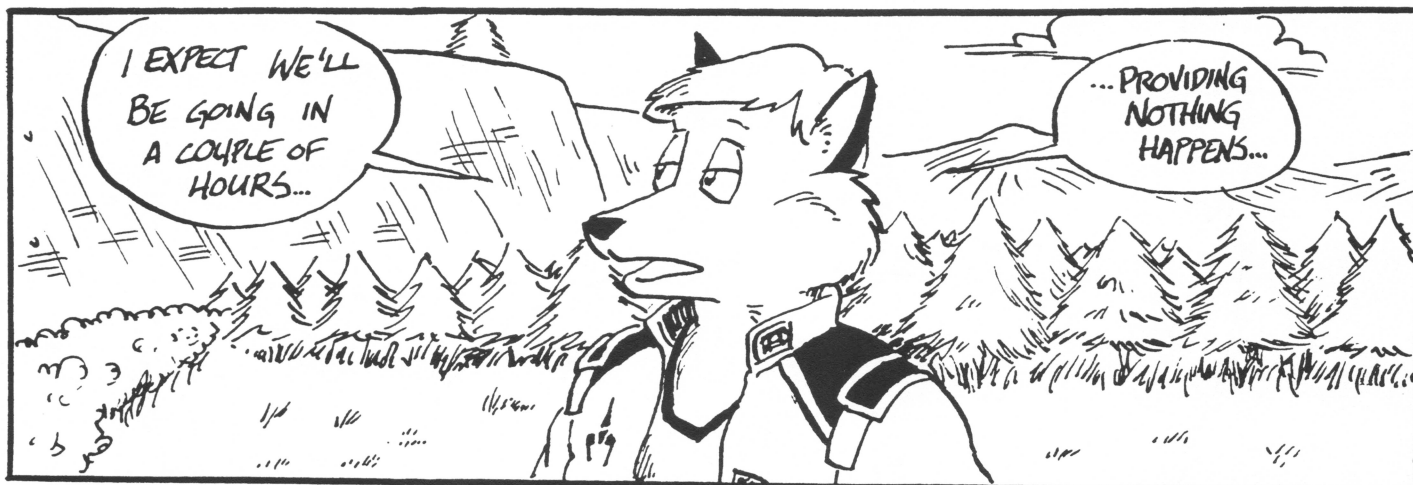




ATTEEEYYAAAAA!!







MEANWHILE, ABOUT SIX KILOMETERS TO THE EAST...





Mr. Popularity

by
James Charles Lynn

The DiFonesse Valley was a quiet place, having seen little change since the Purity Wars had blasted most of the continent back to the Iron Age some thirty years ago. Life here was simple and quiet, humans and the nearly-human 'furries' peacefully co-existing in a way that hadn't been possible before the Wars. Unfortunately, 'peaceful' could also be interpreted as 'boring,' and any new diversion was welcomed by the populace. So when two strangers made their way into the valley one spring evening, the residents were naturally curious about them. Anything new was always interesting. But nobody could predict just how interesting life in that valley would soon become....

• • •

A sizable crowd had gathered around the table in the center of the inn's common room, watching the informal poker game in progress. An oil lamp hung from the center of the ceiling, illuminating the room with a dim, smokey light. Two figures were seated at the table, each concentrating intently on their cards. One was a smallish bat. Her opponent was a tall, gaunt, red fox, in jeans and a denim jacket, with a black leather patch over his right eye.

The fox, Zeb, tried blearily to focus on his cards, his head aching from trying to read in the dim light. No matter how much he glared, they adamantly refused to improve. A massive grey wolf, wearing leather pants and a sleeveless vest open over his bare chest, sat beside him. Charlie had been smart enough not to get into this game in the first place, being careful to pocket his half of their shared funds before the game began. Zeb flipped the cards down before before his friend could get a good look.

There were at least fifty onlookers around the table by now, mostly furries with a few humans scattered amongst them, all watching to see if he could beat their local champion. After all, she'd already won this place and two others, a fact Zeb hadn't been aware of when he agreed to this game. He was regretting having drunk so much beer earlier. He regretted agreeing to a game with no betting limit. He suspected that, before much longer, he'd regret ever having been born.

Arisa pushed five coins to the center of the table and grinned toothily (*very* toothily). "I'll ssee your five, and raisse another five," she said, her voice trailing off into the

usual breathy hiss. Zeb knew full well that bats could speak as normally as any furry, and suspected she was doing it to annoy him. It didn't help that she was damned attractive, even by normal furry standards, and wearing a brief halter top and shorts. The total effect was very disconcerting, making it even harder for him to concentrate on his cards.

Zeb smiled, trying to project a confidence he did not feel, and slid five pieces onto the pile. Then he discarded two cards (he would have preferred to discard all five, wouldn't have looked good) and took the two Arissa dealt him. Zeb worked hard to keep the grimace off his face. He'd thrown away better cards than he recieved. Worse yet, Arissa hadn't taken any. In the last hand, she had bluffed him into folding when he had held a full house and she had only a pair of eights. He could still hear the occasional snicker behind him. He had silently sworn a great oath to not let that happen again.

Arisa flashed that irritating grin again and said, "Lassst bet...." and slid her entire stake onto the pile. The crowd broke out in hushed conversation. This was exactly how she had frightened Zeb into folding last time. All eyes turned to him, as he tried his damndest to figure out what to do next.

He fanned out his cards for one last, futile look. Charlie finally caught a glimpse of the hand, a friendly paw on Zeb's right shoulder. The paw tightened to the point of grinding bones together. Zeb looked at his own pitiful pile of coins, cleared his throat, and said, "um, I don't have that much."

Her smile was genuine now. "Then you fold?" She made as if to sweep up the pile.

"No!" Zeb swallowed hard. "I mean I don't have that much on me. But I can get it."

Arisa looked at him hard for a moment. "How much?"

Before he could think about what he was saying, he replied, "a thousand in gold."

Dead silence fell over the room. The paw on Zeb's shoulder was threatening to break his collarbone, but Charlie didn't dare give any outward sign of his feelings, lest he give it all away. The bat looked at him suspiciously. "Are you that cccertain of your hand?"

Zeb shifted the cards to his left hand, because the right one was going numb from lack of circulation. He could feel Charlie's yellow eyes boring into the back of his neck, but he couldn't back down now. "Yeah," he said with a predatory grin, radiating confidence he didn't feel.

Arisa considered carefully, obviously unsure. He looked down at his cards one final, fatal time, wondering how the hell he'd managed to get put in the position of betting fifteen hundred gold pieces on a pair of sixes.

Finally she nodded. "All right. A thousand gold pieces by dawn." There was no question she could cover it.

Zeb gestured nonchalantly, his heart pounding. "Ladies first."

She shrugged, and spread out her cards. Zeb's heart quit pounding and fell right into his boots.

A full house.

• • •

The game broke up after that, though Arissa was willing enough to continue. Charlie had wordlessly gotten up and walked away, probably heading up to the room they shared. Zeb had a hunch that being in an enclosed space with him right now might not be healthy, so he opted to get some fresh air instead.

Alone, he kicked around the grass next to the edge of a pond, trying to massage some life back into his abused shoulder. There was a soft sound behind him, and Zeb whipped around, a pistol in his left hand. A feminine form coalesced out of the darkness. Arissa. He entertained a brief fantasy about shooting anyway, then reluctantly holstered the gun. "In case you haven't noticed, it's only midnight."

She shook her head. Her voice was still soft, but her former breathy hiss was gone. "I know. I just wanted to talk to you again. That last bet of yours wasn't very bright in more ways than you seem to realize. There's only one place in the valley where you can get that kind of money, and everybody in the room knew it."

Zeb felt a sudden chill run through him.

Arisa nodded, seeing his reaction. "But you're in luck. The Baron is so cheap that the last person who turned in a would-be thief is still waiting for the reward he was promised. Eight years ago. So nobody's probably going to bother telling him this time. Probably." She put special emphasis on this last word.

She had moved up almost close enough to touch him. She only stood about 150 centimeters to Zeb's 190, and he had an excellent view down her top, making him wish for more light. "Um... thanks for the warning."

She placed a gentle hand on his arm. "It's real urgent places to rush to. At most whispering now, she continued, "I also wanted to let you know, just in case you had any thoughts about sneaking away without paying your debt..."

The teasing fingers suddenly clamped hard onto the front of his shirt and the next thing he knew he was flying through the air. "Shiiiiit!" he screamed, landing dead center in the pond with a loud splash.

The water was just barely deep enough to cushion the impact. Zeb stood up, sputtering. Arissa smiled toothily again from the bank, more than ten meters away. "Just a gentle warning. I come from a long line of excellent night hunters. Personally, I'd rather we were friends." She extended her arms, unfolding amazingly large wings, and took to the air with a soft but authoritative 'whump' of displaced air.

Zeb winced as she flew over. "Me, too," he muttered, sloshing for the shore.

As he crawled out, his progress was interrupted by a massive boot before his nose. Looking up, he saw Charlie frowning at him. "Have a fight?"

Zeb stood unsteadily. "Just a gentle warning against welshing. I think she likes me."

"I can't imagine why."

Zeb started stripping off his clothes to wring them out. "Look, I'm sorry about the game. I miscalculated. I thought that last bet would scare her into folding. I made a mistake and I'm sorry."

"Mistake? How about disaster? I didn't have enough to cover one quarter of that insane bet you made, so Arissa's locked you, and incidentally me, out of our room. We can't touch any of our equipment until she's paid! That's going to make things just a little bit difficult." Charlie shook his head in exasperation. "Are you all right? Did you break anything from your little flying lesson?"

"Nah." Zeb wrung his shirt out, drenching the grass. "Didn't hurt me a bit."

"Good," Charlie rumbled, picking him up and throwing him back into the pond.

• • •

Two hours later they were walking down a dusty, rarely used road. Zeb sniffed a damp sleeve and grimaced. "I smell like duck shit," he complained.

Charlie rolled his eyes skyward. "Try to imagine how little I care."

Zeb sighed. "How many times do I have to say I'm sorry?"

"Keep working on it."

"Charlie, how hard do you think it's going to be to get in and out of this dump? The castle is falling down, the area around the castle is so overgrown that it'd be hard *not* to find good cover, and the guards don't even know which end of a sword you hold on to! You couldn't *ask* for an easier haul!"

Charlie turned on him. "And what do we have to work with? One gun, two knives, ten meters of rope, and one pickled fox! I don't think the odds are exactly in our favor." He leaned forward and sniffed. "Just how much *did* you drink, anyway?"

Zeb shrugged. "I don't remember."

"Well, that's too damn much. I could probably light your

breath with a match!" He reached out and grabbed the front of Zeb's jacket, lifting him up so that they were nose to nose. Then he got a good whiff of Zeb's breath and put him back down. "Goddammit, when we first teamed up I thought you were a professional. In the last six months I've had no complaints. But ever since you talked me into this damned side trip for this 'easy haul,' you've done nothing but screw up! Where the hell is your brain?"

Zeb couldn't look him in the eye. Charlie snorted in disgust and turned away. In a low voice, Zeb asked, "if you're so sick of me then why are you putting yourself out for me?"

Charlie snorted in disgust and started walking again. "I don't know," he rumbled, "and if you're smart you won't ask me to think it over."

Fifteen minutes later they crossed a large, wooden footbridge over a deep ravine. Zeb peered over the side into the shadows below. "This is just what I was talking about, Charlie. This bridge is the only way across this thing for three clicks in either direction, and it's not even guarded! This place has been at peace since the Baron occupied the valley thirty years ago. He can't expand his borders because he'd get stomped, so he just sits on his fat butt, lords it over two tiny villages, and pretends he's a big shot. He's fat, lazy, and complacent. He'll never know what hit him."

"He has two hundred trained soldiers, Zeb. He can afford to be complacent."

"Trained, my ass! You've seen these slobes at work. He could have a million and it wouldn't matter, if he doesn't use them efficiently. Who the hell's watching the damned br--"

A new voice intruded from the darkness, making them both jump. "Hold it right there!"

Charlie couldn't keep a sour smirk from his face. "Well, you *did* ask."

An armored wolverine stepped out of the bushes, buckling his sword belt on. "This is a restricted area. What are you doing out here?"

"It is?" Zeb asked, looking around and scratching his head. "I didn't see any signs...."

"If you'd stuck to the road you would have seen them, asshole." The wolverine cautiously stepped up to them, hand on his sword hilt. "Which means you didn't pass the gate. Where'd you jump the fence and what the hell are you doing?"

"Well, lessee..." Turning a little to mask the movement, Zeb reached under his jacket and pulled out the pistol, aiming it at the guard's chest. "Nice armor," he grinned. "How well does it work against bullets?"

The wolverine looked startled, then returned the grin, placing a hand on his sword hilt. "Let's find out." His blade hissed evilly out of the scabbard. "And if you do shoot, the noise will draw plenty of attention in a big hurry."

Zeb's smile vanished as he ducked under a swing meant to take his head off. He had kind of hoped the guard wouldn't see that one little flaw in his plan. What the hell was he going

to do now? And where the hell was Charlie?

Frightened, Zeb backed away from the wolverine as he hacked the air between them. What the guard lacked in skill he more than made up for in enthusiasm, whipping the blade back and forth like a demented samurai. Zeb could do little but duck or keep backing away. Things were definitely getting out of hand. Then he saw a large shadow loom behind the wolverine. A great, hairy paw fell on the guard's helmet, lifting it off his head. Before he could even react, a second paw curled into a fist and crashed down on his skull. The guard collapsed instantly.

Charlie tossed the helmet aside, rubbing his sore fist. Zeb reholstered the gun, but he was shaking so badly it took a couple tries. "What... what the hell were you waiting for?"

Charlie grinned. "I hoped that might sober you up a bit. Besides, the look on your face was priceless," he laughed.

"What a pal," Zeb sighed.

• • •

The Baron's castle loomed before them, and even in the darkness it was easy to tell how run-down it was. The stones were crumbling, leaving an apron of debris around the entire building, and some kind of vine grew wild over walls, almost obscuring them in places. In several spots, bushes had been allowed to grow right up to the base of wall. Fifteen meters overhead, figures could be seen walking the parapets, careful not to come too close to the disintegrating edge.

Zeb drew the rope from Charlie's bag, and fished around for the grapnel while his friend kept a lookout. Trying to watch in every direction at once, Charlie hissed, "You sober enough to throw that thing accurately?"

"Of course," Zeb whispered confidently, finding the grapnel and attaching it.

He stepped back from the bushes, fixing his eye on a target. The window they'd picked was six meters up, dark, and open to the night air. He coiled the rope carefully on the ground, making sure it wouldn't tangle as it unwound. Hefting the hook in his left hand, he whirled it in a tight circle, then released. It flew dead center through the window, bouncing inside with a muffled thump. Carefully, he reeled in the rope until it securely caught against the bottom of the window. He nodded to Charlie and scrambled up.

He grasped the bottom of the frame and pulled himself into the darkened room. He scanned quickly with his flashlight. A large, roomy bedroom, dark and empty. Just like he'd been told. He flicked the light once at Charlie, who started up. Zeb listened to the rope creak alarmingly under the weight, then reached out to grasp his friend's paw, hauling him in through the window.

"So far so good," Zeb muttered, unfolding a small map. "The bedroom's just down the hall, so we--" A noise made him look up just as something heavy exploded over his head.

He awoke to the sounds of scuffling in the dark and an excruciating headache. Shaking his head groggily (which didn't help), he forced himself to his feet, reaching for the light still shining on the floor as his other hand reached for his pistol. If Charlie could just keep this guy busy a second longer....

He brought the flashlight up and saw that Charlie already had the problem well in hand. Literally. A small ermine in a transparent nightgown struggled in his arms. Her wrists were clamped together in one of his paws while the other covered her mouth, letting only muffled squeaks escape. Zeb walked over and placed the barrel of his gun against her nose, holding the flashlight so she'd see it clearly. The 12mm bore apparently had a tranquilizing effect, for she stopped struggling instantly, her wide, terrified eyes focused on him.

Zeb hissed, "that's very good. Now if you behave yourself, we'll probably let you live. Do you understand?" She swallowed hard and nodded. A single tear fell into the fur on her cheek and he suddenly felt like the world's biggest heel. He continued, "my friend is going to let you go. You will sit on the bed and not make a sound. If you try to scream or run, I will kill you immediately. Do you believe me?"

She nodded.

Zeb gestured to Charlie, who cautiously released her mouth. She sniffled once, but didn't cry out. He let her wrists go and, meekly, she moved over to the bed and sat, hands in her lap, staring fearfully at both of them.

Charlie found an oil lamp in the corner and lit it, casting a smokey light over the room. Zeb looked down at the shards of broken pottery scattered about his feet and felt the lump that was growing on the back of his head. Ow. Glaring at the trembling girl, he snapped, "who the hell are you and what are you doing in here?"

In a quiet, quivering voice, she said, "My name is Sharla DiFonnesse, sir. And I live here."

DiFonnesse. The Baron's daughter. Fucking wonderful. He asked, "Why are you in *here*? This room was supposed to be empty."

She bit her lip. "I wanted to sleep here for a change. So I could get up in the morning and watch the sunrise from the window."

Charlie did a double-take. "Um, sweetheart, that window faces northwest."

Sharla looked embarrassed. "Oh."

The problem of what to do with their prisoner arose. Tying and gagging her was the best solution, except for a couple of problems. Zeb had stumbled against the window when Sharla hit him, and the grapnel was now lying in the bushes six meters below, along with all their rope. A quick search of the room turned up little more than bare furniture, one pulverized vase, and a bed that was stripped to the mattress. Even the closet was empty, the door missing. Sharla's nightgown was too brief and delicate to make decent bonds.

"Knock her out," Charlie suggested, cracking his knuckles

suggestively.

Zeb shook his head. "Not reliable enough. She could wake up before we're done."

Sharla who had been watching silently, spoke up. "I promise to be quiet."

Startled, they turned to her.

"I'll be quiet, honest. If you tell me what you're looking for, I might even know where to find it."

Charlie scowled suspiciously. "Now why would you do that?"

A grim smile crossed her face. "If you grew up with the old bastard like I did, you wouldn't have to ask. I figure you're here to steal something, and it's no skin off my nose, so why should I get in your way?"

"Makes sense." Zeb commented mildly.

Charlie was aghast. "You're going to believe her?"

"Of course not." He thought a moment. "I guess one of us will have to babysit her."

"What?"

He shrugged. "We have no other reliable way to keep her quiet. We'll take her with us when we go and turn her loose later. Look." He pulled out the map and traced the route with his finger. "I had originally planned to do this alone, if I couldn't talk you into coming along--"

"I wish you hadn't."

He ignored that. "Anyway, if you just follow the diagram--"

"You got that map from the same asshole who told us this room would be empty!"

Zeb folded the paper angrily. "Fuck it. Let's get the hell out of here, then!"

"After going through all this? Forget it!" Charlie snatched the map. "You watch her. I am going to finish this damn job if it kills me!"

"I'm not sure I'd put it quite that way."

"One hour. If I'm not back by then, look for your own way out. Wait for me at the inn."

Yeah, where Arissa will be waiting for us both. "Okay," Zeb nodded. At a sudden thought, he handed the gun to Charlie. "Just in case."

Charlie half-smiled, sticking the pistol in his belt. Then he snuck out the door, closing it silently.

Zeb walked over to his prisoner, sitting down on the bed next to her. "So it looks like we're stuck with each other. What do you want to talk about?"

Smiling coyly, she said, "you know, you're kind of cute."

Zeb raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

She giggled and nodded. "Really. That eyepatch makes you look dashing. Even if you do smell funny...."

Charlie returned about forty minutes later, in a big hurry. He rushed in through the door, then closed it quietly behind him and shot the bolt home. The room was dark, and as soon as his heart quit hammering in his ears, he heard something else: soft moans and enthusiastically creaking bedsprings.

He hissed, "Are you out of your mind? We're in the middle of a burglary!"

The creaking paused. "Hi, Charlie. Um, could you come back in about, oh... three minutes?"

Louder, he said, "we're in trouble! The guards are on to us! They're searching the place now!"

There was a beat of perfect silence, then, "oh, SHIT!"

Zeb bounced off of the bed, scrambling for his clothes. There was a feminine squeal of indignation. "Hey! I wasn't finished yet!"

"Neither was I," he mourned, frantically pulling his pants up, only to discover he had them backwards.

Charlie lit the lamp, and Sharla squealed again, grabbing her nightie and pulling it on. Why she bothered, he didn't know. It was so sheer one could read a newspaper through it.

Zeb had his pants and shirt on now, and was working on the boots. Staying near the door, Charlie whistled sharply. When Zeb looked up, Charlie tossed him the gun. "You're better with this thing than me."

Zeb tucked the gun away, after making darn sure the safety was on. As he finished dressing, he asked, "what happened?"

Charlie grimaced. "The Baron woke up while I was searching his bedroom. He was drunk and not very willing to listen to reason. I kinda accidentally broke both his legs."

"Goody!"

They both looked strangely at Sharla, who stopped bouncing and applauding, suddenly embarrassed.

Everyone was then distracted by a clunk at the window. Another grapnel had attached itself to the frame. It shook as somebody climbed the rope. A male voice floated musically up. "Oh Sharla, my little Lustweasel... your Studpuppy's here!"

Zeb looked over at Sharla, who was hiding her face in her hands and groaning. "I don't believe this," he said in soft wonder. "We'd have had more peace and quiet robbing the fucking Town Hall in broad fucking daylight!" He went over to the window, snarling, "she's busy, Studpuppy!" Then he kicked the grapnel out of the windowframe. It vanished, and there was a horrified scream truncated by a solid thud.

She gasped. "Is he dead?"

Zeb cocked an ear, listening to the moans of agony floating up. "Not yet." Then realization hit him. "So *that's* why you were up here...!"

She snapped, "that's none of your business!"

Charlie cut in, saying, "I hear voices outside. Since Mastermind here has kicked our only possible means of escape out the window for the second time tonight, I'd like to know just how we're going to get out of here. Suggestions, anyone?"

Zeb looked at the window, finally realizing what he had done. "Uh..."

The doorknob rattled, then somebody started pounding. "Aw, shit!" Charlie yelled, putting his weight against the door. "Think of something quick!"

Sharla piped up, "I know a safe way out of here. But you've got to promise to take me with you!"

"Deal!" Zeb said, before Charlie could raise any objections. "Show us."

She ran over to the closet and pushed a couple of stones. The floor fell away, revealing a staircase. "I grew up here, you know," she said smugly. "This leads to an old sewer tunnel that runs half a kilometer past the walls and comes out in the forest."

Zeb grinned and slapped Charlie on the shoulder. "See? And you wanted to get rid of her!"

The figures moved swiftly and relatively quietly through the darkened woods. Voices could be heard in the distance, but none came close. Zeb had given Sharla his jacket and she clung tightly to his tail as the three made their way towards the road. Quietly, Zeb asked her, "Why do you want to go with us, anyway?"

Happily, Sharla replied, "I've wanted away from that old rummy for years. And Putzie was wearing on my nerves."

"Putzie?"

"Yeah. You met him. Sorta. He was gonna ask Dad for my hand in marriage soon. And we'd be one big happy family under Daddy's roof, 'cause that'd be the only way Dad would agree to it. I was getting ready to run away."

"Really." Zeb observed. "Then why were you waiting to see him tonight?"

She gave him an exasperated look. "You know! He's got all these dumb old-fashioned ideas about love and marriage, but he knows his stuff in the sack!" She smiled up at him. "But now I've found someone who's even better at that, and I know *you* won't talk any nonsense about marriage!"

She enthusiastically hugged him about the waist, causing him to stumble and almost fall on his face. Again. "You got that right," he muttered darkly, grabbing her arm to keep her moving.

He could just see his friend's form in the bushes ahead, but Zeb's ears were much better than his one eye, and he knew Charlie was trying very hard not to bust a gut laughing.

• • •

"Shit!" Charlie hissed. "We're surrounded!"

The three of them were crouched in the bushes, trying very hard to look inconspicuous. The fence marking the edge of the Baron's property was less than a hundred meters away. In the woods around them ranged a dozen or so guards, carrying wood torches or oil lamps. Technology hadn't yet managed to find its way back to the valley after the wars, which was what had made the place so attractive to begin with. Torchlight was vastly inferior to electric lights in this situation, but Zeb was rapidly becoming obsessed with visions of dying in a major forest fire started by one of these morons tripping and dropping his light.

Sharla clutched Zeb tightly, shivering. "What are we going to do?"

Noting their haphazardly random search pattern, he whispered, "maybe we can wait them out." Then his heart sank as one of the guards, another wolverine (a species Zeb was learning to truly despise), wandered over to the bush. He held his torch high as he peered into the foliage. The dim, flickering light cast crazy shadows everywhere, making it much harder for everyone to see. Zeb placed a warning hand over Sharla's muzzle and reached for his gun as the guard moved aside a branch to look deeper.

The wolverine leaned forward and Zeb saw his eyes widen in realization. Then several things happened almost at once. A huge, furry fist shot past Zeb's left ear like a guided missile, slamming into the guard's muzzle with an audible crunch of breaking bone. Already unconscious, the guard fairly flew backwards. Unfortunately, his torch flipped from his hand—right into the bush where they were hiding.

Sharla screamed as everyone bailed out of the sudden inferno. The remaining guards shouted and milled about, still not sure exactly what had happened. Then the tremendous, staccato roar of an assault rifle shattered the air, muzzle flashes strobelighting the clearing. Everyone hit the dirt as slugs ricocheted and whined amongst the trees.

The barrage went on for interminable seconds before silence fell again. Fortunately, nobody had been hit. Zeb would have cheerfully shot the son of a bitch except his own gun had gone flying when he dove for cover and was now lost in the bushes. The guard popped the magazine on his rifle and fished in his pack for another. His arm came in contact with the hot barrel and he yelped, dropping the weapon. The smell of singed fur floated over the clearing.

In the midst of all this, one thought echoed loud and clear through Zeb's mind: *I want to go home!*

Half the troops had blundered off into the woods by now, minus their torches. The other half were busily beating out fires the dropped torches had started. This was getting ridiculous. Worse yet, the noise would be sure to bring help in a big hurry. They had minutes to get away, at best.

An idea suddenly came to Zeb, something from a movie he'd seen long ago. The idea was pretty stupid, but then so was

the situation. He leaned over and whispered urgently into Charlie's ear to get a second opinion.

A moment later, Charlie stood up in the shadows and yelled, "There they go! They're doubling back into the woods! Get 'em!"

There was more excited shouting, punctuated by the occasional rifle burst, as the guards ran into the forest, waving their weapons. A moment later the trio stood up, alone and quite amazed, as the noise faded into the distance.

"I'll be damned," Charlie muttered.

• • •

Dawn was just beginning to color the sky as the three hid in the woods behind Arissa's inn. The woods were still full of the Baron's troops and civilian 'volunteers,' resulting in a series of close scrapes that didn't really bear remembering. "You know," Zeb commented, "when I was just a cub, I would get depressed because everyone ignored me. But now I feel incredibly popular for some reason."

Charlie gave him a strange look but said nothing.

They ducked as three soldiers rounded the corner. One knocked loudly on the back door. A moment later, Arissa appeared, then hurriedly stepped aside as they shouldered their way in. "Oh, shit," Zeb groaned.

"Why did you come back here anyway?" Sharla whispered.

"Because," Zeb sighed, "everything we own that we're not carrying is in a room on the upper floor. If we don't bust it out somehow, it's gonna be a damn hard cross-country trip. We're going to have to take Arissa. Somehow."

"Speaking of which," Charlie interrupted, "any ideas yet?"

"Still working on it."

All was silent for a moment, then a breathy, outraged scream issued from the building: "I said, I don't know anything about any fox, wolf, or the Baron's fucking brat being kidnapped!"

Zeb and Charlie turned to regard Sharla, who looked sheepish. "I guess I forgot to leave Daddy a note...."

Any further conversation was interrupted by a crash from the inn. The door flew off its hinges as all three troops were ejected with considerable force. Groaning, they helped each other stagger to their feet as Arissa stepped out, yelling, "and don't come back until you learn some fucking manners!"

They limped away, glaring back, as she picked up the door and fastidiously re-mounted it on its hinges. She finished the job with the tired familiarity of one who had done this many, many times before. Then she went back inside, restoring the illusion of peace and quiet.

"Wow," Zeb said admiringly. "That's some temper she's got."

Charlie gave him another strange look. "Have you lost your

mind? We've gotta find some way to get past that temper and you sound like you're falling in love! I think we should just forget the packs and get the hell out of here right now."

Zeb turned at a faint noise in the distance behind them. After watching a moment, he said, "Charlie, we've got another problem."

Charlie rolled his eyes. How much more of this could one wolf take? "Tell it to take a number and get in line."

"I wish I could. I hear troops sweeping this way through the woods. And it looks like somebody's managed to scrounge up some flashlights." There was a sharp, unmistakable pop from that direction. "And some guns," he continued. "We're boxed in."

"What are we going to do?" Sharla asked, shivering.

Charlie forced down the first dozen or so responses that came to mind. "Well," he finally sighed, "I know one place where they won't look for us again, at least for a little while."

Zeb and Sharla followed Charlie's gaze, to the ominously silent back door of the tavern. "You have got to be kidding," Zeb groaned.

Charlie grabbed his upper arm. "If there's a solution to our problems, it lies in there. Come on, Mr. Popularity. It's time you faced your adoring public."

"But... but..."

"Don't worry, sweetheart." Sharla piped up, clutching his neck. "I'll be right there with you!"

Zeb gasped as several vertebrae were jolted out of place. Maybe popularity wasn't such a great thing after all.

• • •

Surprisingly, the door was unlocked. Zeb led the way, for his size made him a better sneak than Charlie, though Sharla's clutching his tail wasn't helping any.

They went through a side door into the common room. The place was empty, chairs neatly stacked upside down on the tables. The lamp was still lit, casting its inadequate illumination. At a table in the center of the room, a small, dark figure was hunched over a ledger, back turned to them. Silently as he could, Zeb lifted a bottle from a nearby shelf, hefted it like a club, and started forward on tiptoe.

Before his third step, Arissa spoke without turning around. "I was wondering when you three would get the nerve to come in. I even left the door unlocked for you. Why don't you pick up some glasses to go with that bottle you grabbed, and we'll have a drink. On the house, of course."

Zeb stopped, deflating on the spot. "How'd you know?"

Arissa turned to them and grinned. "I have very good hearing." She flicked her enormous ears to illustrate her point.

Charlie grabbed the bottle from Zeb's hand and some glasses

from the counter. As everyone sat down, he poured them all a round. All except one. Zeb looked at the empty spot before him and asked, "why don't I get any?"

Charlie scowled and capped the bottle firmly, thumping it onto the table, well out of his friend's reach. "You have had enough for one night!"

Zeb fumed as everyone laughed at him. Then Arissa turned and looked at Sharla. "I can't believe you two came all this way just to kidnap *her*."

Sharla stuck her tongue out, and squealed as Arissa made a lightning grab for it. Zeb sighed and put an arm around Sharla's waist to keep her out of trouble.

Charlie said, "we didn't. We came to steal something else entirely. She kind of attached herself to Zeb and tagged along."

"Really?" Arissa looked surprised. "I heard a little about your adventure at the castle." She grinned. "You two really have a talent for pissing people off."

Zeb grumped, "We're having a bad night."

"So I noticed." She looked Zeb over appraisingly. "Can't say I blame her for latching onto you, though. I always liked 'em young and dumb, myself." Zeb winced and she chuckled at his obvious discomfort. Then she turned serious. "So where's my money?"

Defeated, Zeb shook his head silently. Charlie tensed, ready for violence. Arissa merely frowned, though, and said, "I expected as much. Fortunately, as I said earlier, I like you. I'm sure we can figure something out. I'll have to keep you down in the cellar for a while until the heat dies down, of course, but I could certainly use a new cook and dishwasher. The last one finally worked his debt off last week and I've been short-handed ever since. It shouldn't take longer than a year or so. Of course," she continued, reaching out to stroke his cheek with a claw, making him flinch away, "we could find ways to work it off a little faster, if your stamina holds out."

"NO!" Sharla screamed, startling the hell out of everyone. "He's with me! You can find yourself another bedwarmer!" She grabbed Zeb fiercely around the waist.

Arissa was amused. "You should mind your manners, sweetie. Your Daddy isn't here to protect you now."

"Now let's all take it easy," Charlie said, "we can work something out, I'm sure," as he reached under his vest for a knife. The way this night had been going, he knew better than to hope this would end peacefully.

"I don't care!" Sharla announced. "Zeb will protect me!"

Zeb swallowed hard, suddenly the center of some very unwelcome attention. Arissa's grin was starting to look a little forced. She was obviously tiring of this game already. "Um," he said, groping desperately for some words that might salvage the situation.

"Furthermore," Sharla continued, "I know my Zeb, and he's not the sort who would lower himself to consort with a *bitch*

like you!"

Stunned silence descended over the room, broken only by an exasperated groan from Charlie. In a cold, dangerous voice, Arissa asked, "what... did you call me?"

"I called you a bitch!" she shrieked. Then she smiled, delighted that her refined wit had found a way through her foe's infuriating wall of self assurance. If a little was good, then more must be better, she apparently reasoned. "You're the ugliest, smelliest, most disgusting bitch I've ever seen! Bitch, bitch, bitch!"

Zeb had finally managed to get his hand over Sharla's mouth, about twenty words too late. For a brief second he saw honest pain in Arissa's eyes, then her temper took over. With a furious hiss, she slammed her fist down on the table, shattering it. The others were bowled over in a storm of splinters, Zeb and Charlie scrambling for weapons.

Sharla squealed in terror, hiding behind her Zeb. Arissa stood amidst the ruins of her table, powerful muscles rippling furiously under her hide. He held up his blade like a talisman, wishing he hadn't lost his gun. He had a spare in his pack, but somehow he doubted she'd give him a time-out to go get it.

Arissa watched them all for a moment, eyes glaring a furious red, then hissed, "Dammit, nobody talks to me like that and gets away with it! Let me have the brat, Zeb. I'll only mark her up a little. An eye, maybe, or a couple of teeth. Let me have her or I'll go through you to get her!"

Zeb was finding it impossible to maintain a balanced fighting stance with Sharla clutching him. "I can't let you do that, Arissa."

"You tell her, Zeb!" Sharla cried.

"Shut the fuck UP!" he yelled, swinging around to backhand her across the mouth. She screamed and fell to the floor, sobbing.

Arissa was in motion even as he turned back. She fainted at him, then abruptly changed course and went for Charlie instead. Ducking under his clumsy knife swing and grabbing him by the belt, she lifted his 130 kilos with horrifying ease and threw him the length of the room, where he landed with a crash that shook the building. He struggled to get up, then collapsed, groaning.

"Charlie!" Zeb yelled, rushing towards him. Arissa landed nimbly in his path, folding her wings back in. She reached out and grabbed his knife arm, twisting it hard. The blade skittered across the floor and he stood defenseless, trying desperately to squirm from her grip. God, she was strong!

Arissa smiled and moved closer, her fangs gleaming in the half light. "You should have accepted my generous offer." An idea seemed to occur to her. Grinning evilly, she said, "If you're that set on leaving, I might accept some collateral against payment." Slowly she reached downward....

Zeb's eyes widened with sudden terror. Without thinking, he curled his fist and punched her in the breast.

Arissa screamed in surprised pain and let go, holding her

chest. He scrambled across the floor for his knife.

With an enraged snarl, Arissa launched herself towards him, claws outstretched and murder in her eyes. Zeb backedpedaled, then tripped over Sharla. He fell onto his back, slamming his skull into the floorboards. He blinked back stars and looked up as Arissa, who had extended her wings in her fury, flew directly over him, unable to stop. Their eyes met for a brief, amazed second, then she was gone. There was a crash of more splintering furniture.

Zeb got to his feet and watched her pull herself from a tangle of broken chairs. She checked her wings for damage, then glared at him. "GODDAMMIT," she raged, "DO YOU KNOW WHAT THIS IS GOING TO DO TO MY INSURANCE RATES??"

"Well, excuse me for surviving!" Zeb yelled back. "Why don't we call it off while you still have a place to insure?"

This apparently didn't deserve an answer. She exploded from the tangle of broken furniture, then landed a couple of meters out of his reach, crouched to spring. Her smouldering eyes studied him, looking for the best way to attack. Now she was thinking, which made her more dangerous than ever. Zeb backed up, knife held out. He saw a movement out of the corner of his eye and felt faint hope, praying Arissa was too mad to notice.

Arissa shot forward, faster than Zeb would have believed possible. She slapped the knife from his hand, and he could only watch helplessly as it spun off into the darkness. Iron-tough fingers encircled his throat, cutting off his wind as the momentum of her leap slammed him back against the wall, his head leaving a hole in the faux-wood paneling. Zeb greyed out for a second, wondering how much more his poor, abused skull could take before it simply broke open.

Her eyes burned furiously into his, as she bared her fangs in a grin that had no humor in it. She raised a hand to his chest, claws extended to rip his living heart out. Zeb's wits were still scattered from that last rap on the noggin, and he smiled dreamily and said, "You know, you have beautiful eyes."

Arissa froze, taken totally off-guard. Her expression softened, and even in his dazed state he could tell she desperately wanted to believe that. In this state, she didn't notice a tremendous shadow looming over her from behind. The shadow raised its arms, and two large grey fists slammed down on top of her skull. Arissa blinked once, as if not quite realizing what had happened, then folded in on herself, collapsing into a heap on the floor.

Charlie rubbed his sore knuckles and grinned at Zeb, who was just getting his wind back. Zeb looked up and rasped, "Th-thanks."

"Sure, anytime. Woulda done it sooner but I had to dig myself out of that mess quietly, so she wouldn't notice. Besides, I was enjoying the show."

"Show?"

Charlie nodded, still grinning. "Yeah. You know, I'd almost forgotten how much fun it is to watch you in action...."

• • •

After recovering, Zeb dug two intact chairs out of the wreckage while Charlie found some rope in the cellar. They tied Arissa to one of the chairs, wrapping coil after coil around her, taking care to pin her wings, so that she couldn't get loose without breaking the relatively fragile bones there. They put Sharla in the other chair. She was very docile and didn't resist as they tied her in, only casting occasional angry, tearful glances at Zeb.

"Look, I said I'm sorry for hitting you. If you hadn't been egging things on..." He saw she wasn't interested in his excuses, and sighed, turning away.

Arissa had come around by now, and fixed him with a cold glare. "Oh, for-" he started, then, "Give me a break, dammit! I was trying to save my life! You would have done the same thing in my place."

"You still owe me a thousand gold pieces," she responded flatly.

"I know, I know. You'll get your money. Somehow."

Her expression softened just a bit. "I think I almost believe you." She sighed. "Like I almost believed what you said about my eyes," she concluded bitterly.

Zeb could barely remember saying it, in fact, but he did recall some dim part of his brain noting that he had somehow touched her in that instant, beneath that overbearing, obnoxious exterior. Without really knowing why, in a gentle voice, he said, "I did mean it. You do have beautiful eyes."

Arissa looked at him sharply, obviously unsure what to believe.

At that moment, Charlie came downstairs, two packs in his hands. "Come on. You're not accomplishing anything here. I think they pulled the search back to the castle for now. We should be able to slip out before they return."

Zeb was silent for a moment, then nodded. "Okay." He turned to the captives and said, "I'm sorry it ended up like this...." He wanted to say more, but what? Finally he sighed, taking his pack from Charlie and following him out the door.

• • •

An hour's walk had taken them out of the small valley and into the neighboring country. The search would be far behind them by now, and it would be safe to stop after dark. This was fortunate, for neither had slept in almost two days. Zeb had said little since leaving the inn, keeping his thoughts to himself.

Charlie clapped him on the shoulder. "C'mon, pal, cheer up. We got out in one piece, didn't we?"

Zeb felt the lumps on his head, and winced. "More or less," he sighed. "But a lot of people got needlessly hurt, and we came away empty-handed." For some reason he couldn't get

Arissa off his mind, especially that last look she gave him before he left.

"Not exactly."

Zeb, who had been poleaxed once too often today, looked up uncomprehendingly. "Huh?"

Charlie rooted around in his bag and pulled out a small black box, placing it in his friend's hand. Zeb opened the box, stunned by the enormous, glittering gem within. "Son of a- You *did* get it!"

Charlie grinned. "Arissa didn't seem to be aware of this so I thought it'd be a good idea to keep it to myself. So, you feel better now?"

Zeb held the gem up, admiring the way the sun glinted off its facets. Suddenly the events of the night didn't seem so horrible after all. "Yeah...."

• • •

Sitting tied up in that chair for an hour had taken care of whatever fight had been left in Arissa. She was tired, sore, hungry, and itched in a dozen places she couldn't reach. The worst part was that she could count on staying right there until Moj came in to clean the place at noon, still four hours away. And if he was late this time he would be *extremely* sorry....

Arissa jumped when Sharla cleared her throat, the first sound she had made since they had been left alone, and said, "Um, I'm sorry about what I said earlier. I don't know why I did that."

"Forget it." Arissa sighed. "I've had enough fighting for one night, anyway."

Sharla nodded. "If I ever see him again, I'll have my Daddy's soldiers fix him good!"

"I doubt we'll see him again," Arissa said, a little wistfully.

"Yeah." Sharla thought for a while. "I guess there's no reason for us to be enemies then, huh?"

Arissa gave a wan smile. "No, I guess not. I have enough enemies already."

Sharla smiled back. "I'll see if I can get Daddy to fix your place. He can afford it."

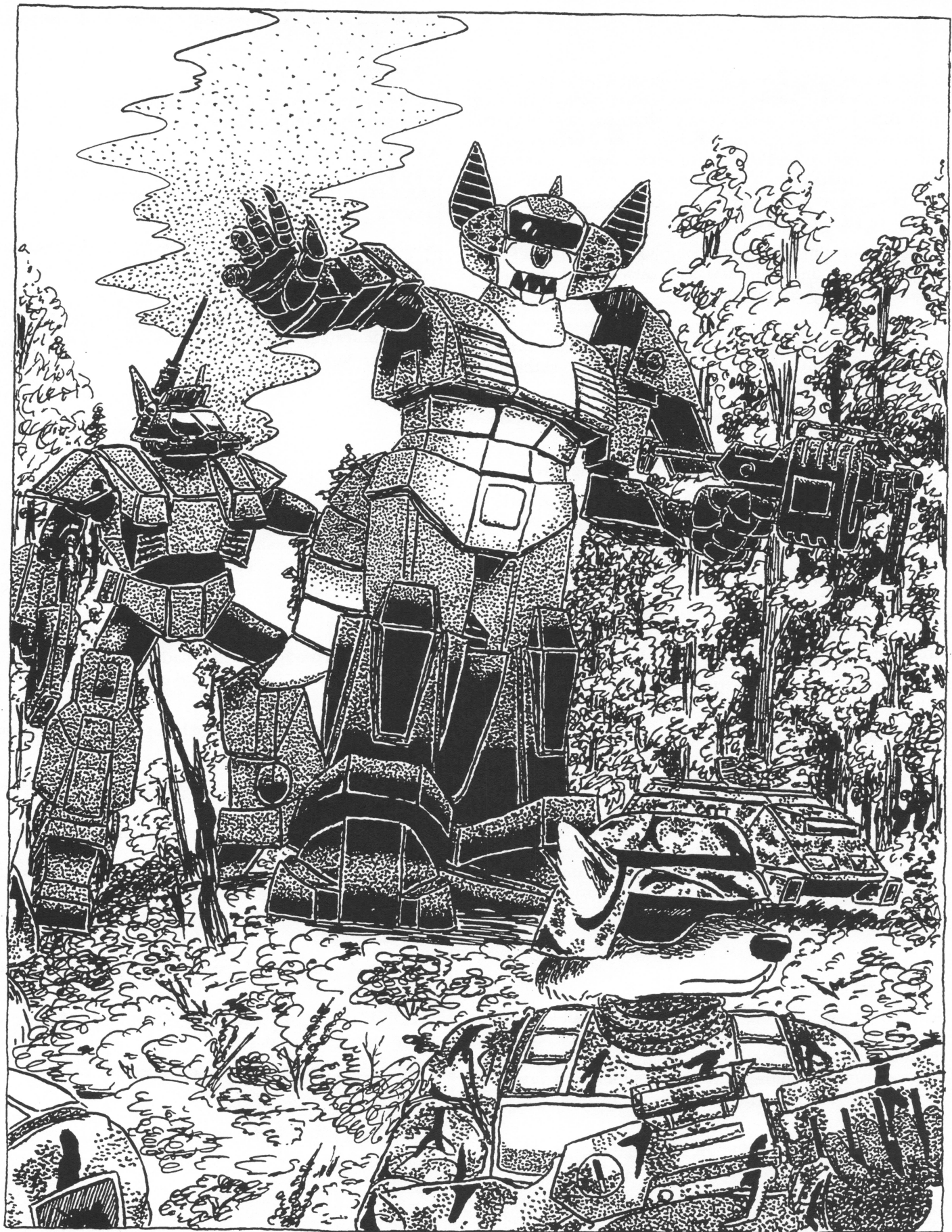
"Really?" She was pleasantly surprised. "That's very generous of you. Thank you."

More silence. Sharla finally said, "Arissa?"

She looked up. "Yes, Sharla?"

"You know, you're awfully cute."

"...what?" 🐾



Getting Away From it all!

PART TWO



FERRET ISLAND, FLORIDA

Dear Taylor,
This is the worst trip I've ever
taken! The car broke down, I
lost my wallet, and the bank
machines don't work! We
can't get into the house, so
we spent the night in a
rented Wombat convertible - and
we're stuck here until my
car is fixed!
I wish I were home! I miss
you!

Taylor Dean
Box 435
Boxen U.
Boxen, PA 18018

JOHN NUNNEMACHER - STORY
JIMMY CHIN - PENCILS
BRYCE NAKAGAWA - INKS

AND ME WITH ONLY
MY SAXOPHONE.



I COULD USE A HOT
SHOWER AND A
SOFT BED.



THIS STAMP REPRESENTS
0.004% OF OUR RESOURCES

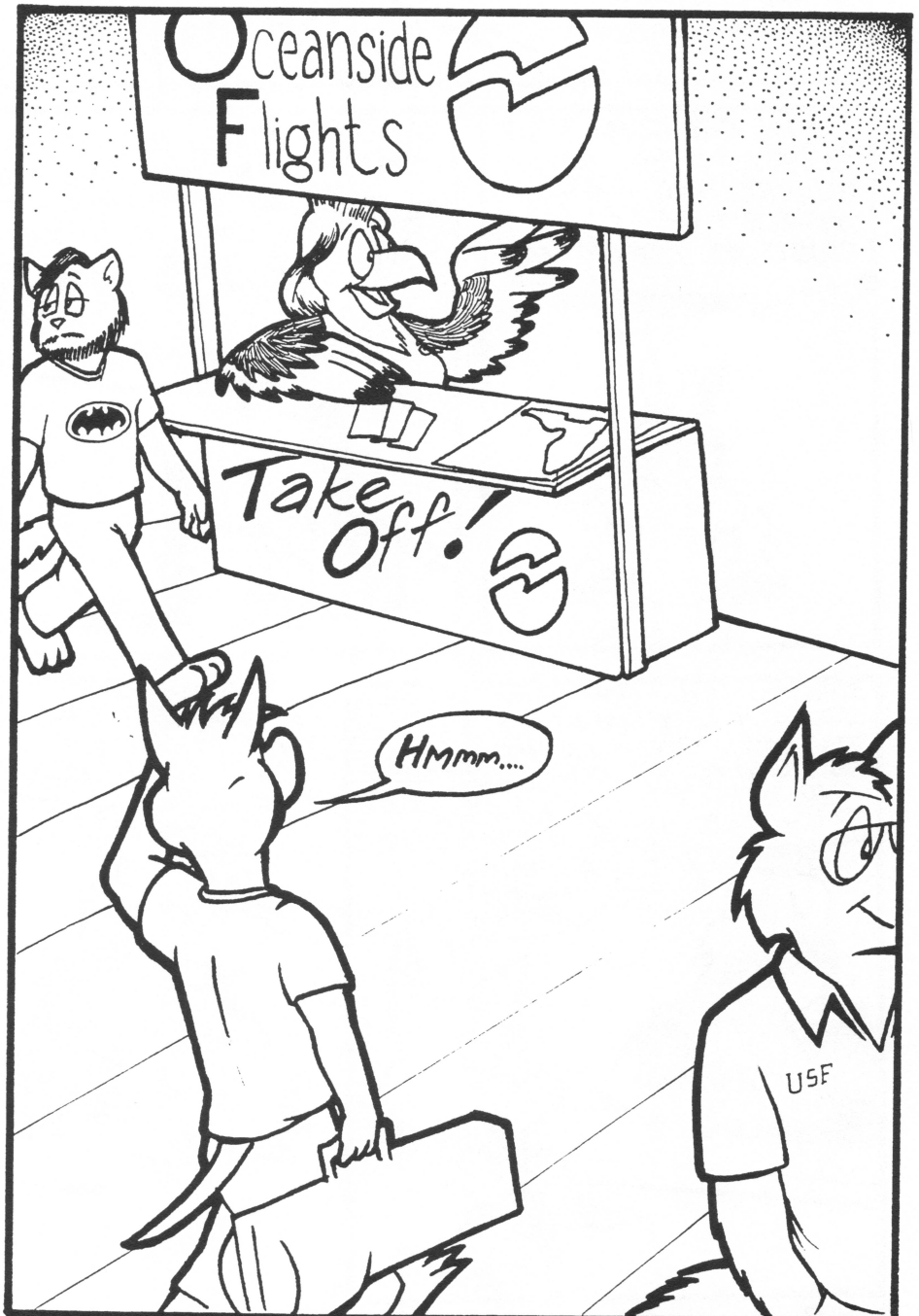
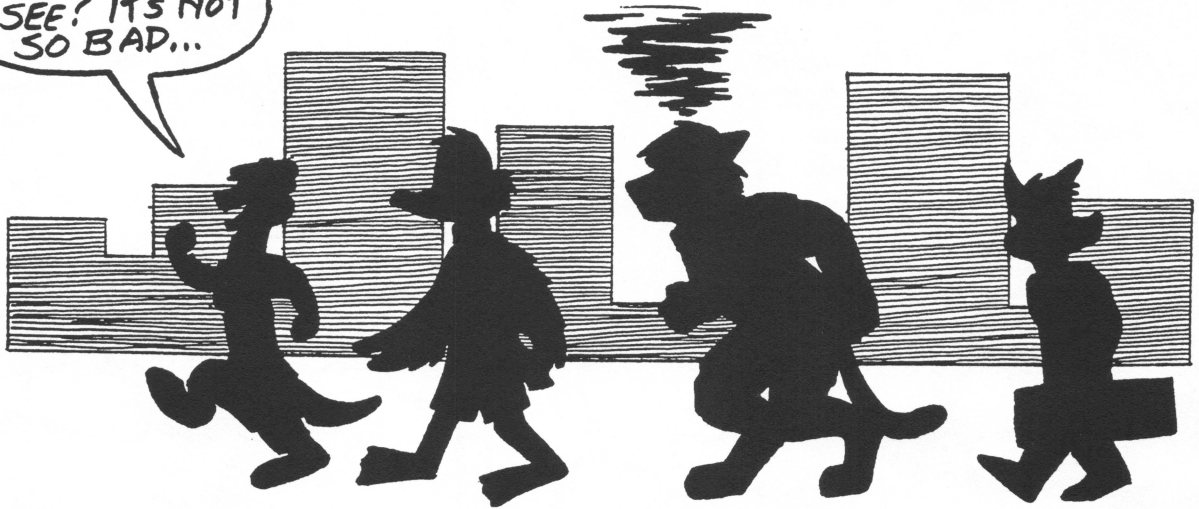


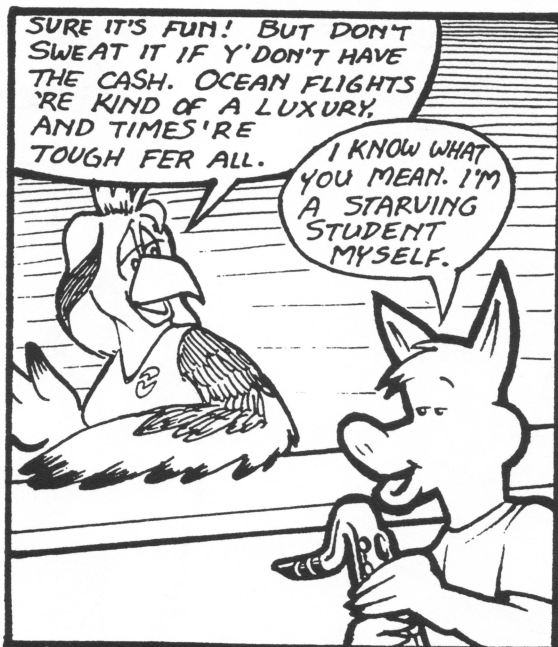
LOOK IT THE BABES!!

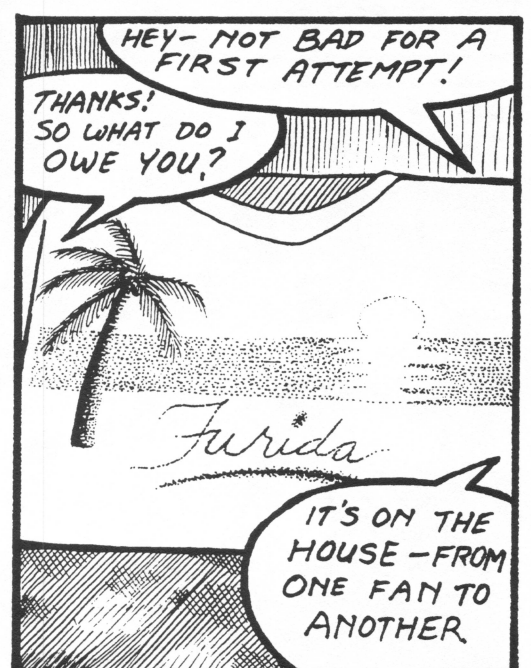




SEE? IT'S NOT
SO BAD...







THAT EVENING, 8:16

HOWDY AGAIN!
Y'FORGOT TO
TELL ME YER
NAME TODAY.

OH, BILL.
BILL HUGHES.

'N YA BROUGHT YER SAX!
WAY RAD.' TELL Y'WHAT-
I "BORROWED" A HARNESS.
IF Y'PROMISE T'PLAY FER
ME- I'LL TAKE YA FER A
NIGHT FLIGHT!

ER... UM... OK,
SURE, I GUESS.

YOU LIKE THE
SAXOPHONE, THEN?

SURE DO! I LOVE
ALL SORTSA MUSIC,
'SPECIALLY JAZZ.
C'MON, LET'S GET
YA STRAPPED IN.

I USED TO
DATE A
TRUMPET
PLAYER-

HE WAS AN
INCREDIBLE
KISSER.

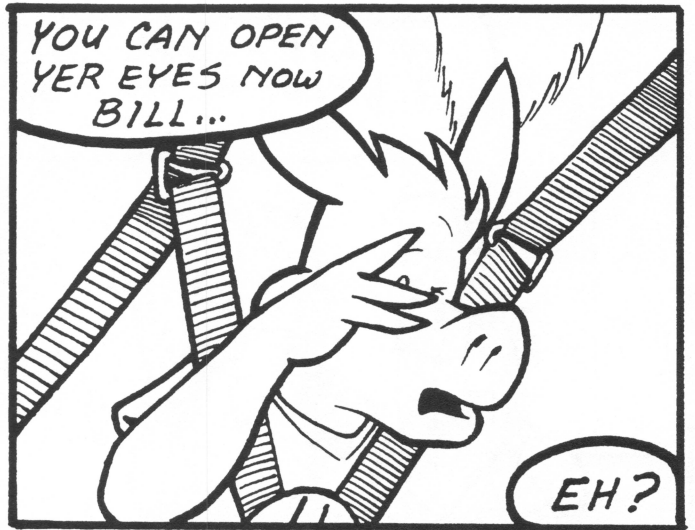
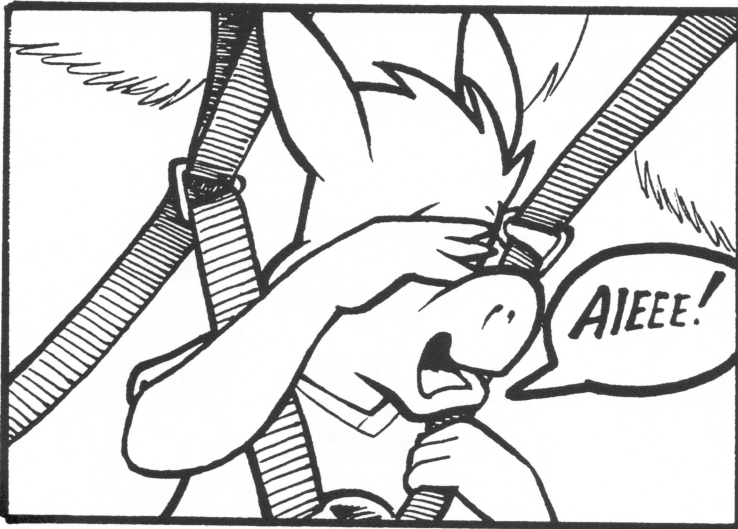
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KLIK
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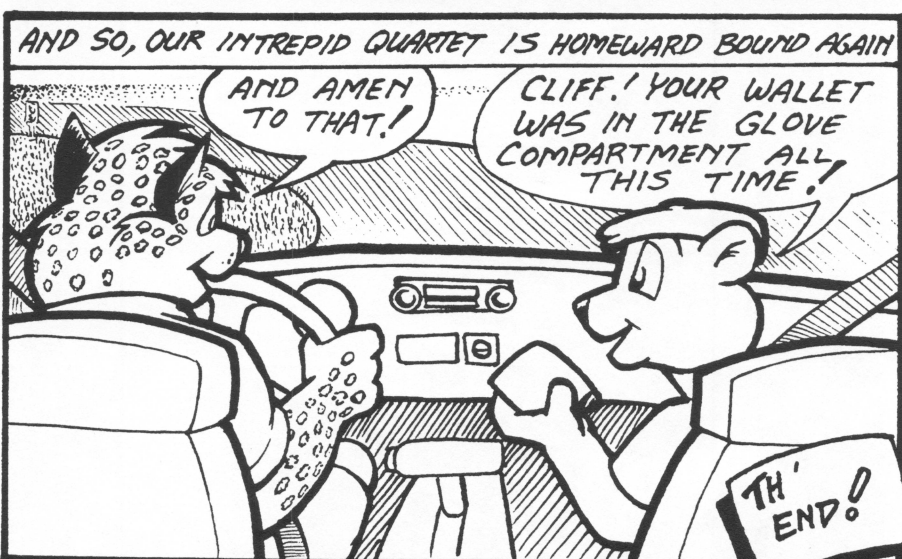
ER, IS THIS
THING SAFE?

IT'S SAFE AS
LONG AS THE
STRAPS ARE ON
TIGHT.

OKAY, LET'S
DO IT!

OH-ACK!









Bast Before...

by Gerald Perkins
illustration by Eric Blumrich

"Cat Saves Nine Lives," the headline said. "Cable car gripman hailed as hero." Thomas Winslow tossed the city section of the newspaper onto his bed. Had there been nine people on the cable car that night? He hadn't counted. The only one who mattered, the mysterious Abyssinian anthropomorph woman, had fled.

He took the statuette of Bast from the top of his bureau. It was a beautiful piece of work; dark green stone carved into the likeness of the cat-headed goddess of ancient Egypt in a formal pose. She stood with sistrum in one hand and an orb of some sort in the other.

The statuette made a thump as it landed on the bed next to the newspaper. Thomas began pulling the light, loose clothing worn by furred 'morphs from bureau drawers. What should he wear to the bell ringing contest? Would Bast be at Union Square tonight? Would the Abyssinian woman?

• • •

He'd always said anything could happen in San Francisco. He never believed that more than the day he first saw Egyptian gods selling candy bars in Union Square.

It wasn't that exotics were new to him. Since the government clamped strict controls on human gene modification ten years ago, the anthropomorphs tended to congregate in a few places. Cosmopolitan San Francisco was one of them. In fact, all he had to do to see an exotic was look in the mirror. The face of a handsome man overlaid with a gray tabby cat looked back at him.

Still, the thought of the beast-headed Egyptian gods as hucksters intrigued him. He worked his way through the noon crowds. The lab that mixed human and cat genes to make him had been a little sloppy, so he walked on his toes. That gave him a gliding pace and made him an inch taller than the average tourist when he moved.

"Oh, look, George, isn't he a darling cat. I wonder what

that uniform he's wearing means."

"Yes dear. I believe it's a muni uniform with cable car patches."

"Oh. Do you suppose . . ."

Yes, ma'm, Thomas thought, I was spliced from a housecat. Yessir, I work the cable cars. I'm the guy that pulls those big levers and rings the bell: a gripman. Yes, ma'm I'd mind a lot if you tried to pet me. Thomas shook away his imagined retort. Oh, usually they weren't that crude, but he never got used to the need for norms to touch him. They never treated the big cats that way.

There was a space between the crowd and the nearest god. Thomas studied the join of ibis head and human neck, looking for a flaw. He couldn't find one. The rest of the god appeared to be a dark-skinned man in his thirties in perfect physical condition. Since he wore only a wrapped and tucked knee-length kilt of white cloth with sandals, he was well displayed. A Bay breeze ruffled Thomas' fur. If the ibis-headed man noticed, he gave no sign.

He also made no attempt to sell his wares. He simply stood on the stair at the Powell and Geary entrance to the park, darting bright black glances at the passersby. He carried a standard vendor's tray filled with neat rows of cellophane-wrapped food. The sign on the tray said, "Aegyptos," in flowing script. In the bubble of quiet that surrounded him, Thomas could hear the god's breath whistling through the nostrils in his curved beak.

A nondescript man in a blue suit stepped from the crowd. Thomas pricked his ears.

"Thoth, giver of wisdom, what have you for me?" the man murmured. Thomas wondered if anyone else heard that peculiar request.

If Thoth said anything in reply, Thomas didn't catch it. He handed a package to the man who placed a bill in the tray and left. Tail twitching, Thomas stepped forward.

"Mortal, I am not for you." The ibis beak did not move, nor did the measuring eye blink, but Thomas heard the words clearly. "What you need is on the far side of this spot of green." Then the cold gaze left him.

The hawk broke Thoth's spell. Actually, it was a man with a hawk head seated on a bench in the middle of the tiny park that brought Thomas to a halt. He was dressed similarly to the ibis-headed man except that he wore a heavy, rayed collar of what looked like gold and carried a scepter rather than a vendor's tray. The raptor gaze acknowledged and dismissed Thomas. He shook himself and walked on. This had to be a gimmick! He had not just seen Horus in Union Square.

The cat-headed woman on the corner of Post and Stockton, diagonally across the park from Thoth, had to represent Bast. Thomas pulse surged until he realized the gray cat head topped a fully human body.

She was dancing. She balanced her tray easily against her hip as she swayed to the rhythm of an instrument that looked rather like a racquetball racquet with only three strings, each with disks strung on it. The sistrum — Thomas recognized it from a long ago visit to a museum — made a buzzing, jangling sound like a tambourine without the drumhead as she shook it. She wore a kilt like the men and a short, sleeveless blouse of sheer material. Thomas saw camera flashes going off in the crowd around her. She ignored them to play with a small group of children. She stood erect as he approached.

"They are very like kittens, no?" she said. Her mouth moved as she spoke. Her voice had the slightest lisp.

Her words hit Thomas like blows. Kittens; yes, the children were very much like kittens. Someday he would like to produce kittens — if there was a felis domesticus 'morph woman, one who would want his children. He looked into bright green eyes that weighed him as thoroughly, but far more gently, than had Thoth.

"Would you care to try my wares?" she asked, curtsying. Wicked humor curled around her words and danced in her eyes.

Thomas had trouble looking away from her. She seemed to be covered with the finest down. A faint, unnameable musk rose from her. One of the children pulled Thomas' tail, then skittered away. He ignored it.

"Well?" said Bast, mischief still in her voice.

Thomas laughed and took two bars without looking. He stepped back with a bow, saying, "Lady Bast, what is the price?"

"A dollar fifty a bar," she said matter-of-factly.

Thomas took a half step back. "I'm sorry," he said, turning as he felt someone behind him. But the woman turned away with a swirl of her long coat, vanishing into the crowd.

"Hey," said someone from the crowd, "would you two mind posing together?" Five minutes later the alarm on his watch went off. Lunch break was over.

Thomas started down Stockton and turned back with a shudder when he saw the god-vendor there. He loathed snakes. Instead, he circled the fringes of the crowd around the jackal-headed man at Post and Powell. The crowd seemed to be trying to avoid Anubis, yet they were there.

The rest of the day went as normal: feel the dip in the street, catch the cable in its slot, haul the big grip lever back, and away they went, bound for Aquatic Park and Fishermans Wharf. Ring the bell a little vigorously because it was a beautiful early summer day.

The hum of the cable, the rumble of track, made a counterpoint to his conductor's spiel. "Tickets please, show me your tickets. Rub cheeks; there's room for two more if you rub cheeks. Give the gripman room, folks. Don't tell me you've never seen a cat?" As usual, he caught the Powell-Mason car to Vallejo, on the edge of Chinatown, and walked a block home.

The penthouse of his apartment building once belonged to a rich man, back when Broadway started gentrifying, before the exotics moved in. The living/dining/kitchen area looked big enough to hold a convention. That was deceptive. The size of the three master bedrooms was not. Thomas felt glad for the small servant quarters back of the kitchen. They were far better than anything else he could afford.

"Hi, Thomas." Pasha lay on the couch in her usual state of undress, burnt orange coat and black stripes blending with the earth tones of the apartment. The white markings on her face and under her chin flashed as she looked from the TV to him.

"Hi, Pasha," he replied. "Where is everybody?"

"Vincent and Lil are shopping. Rebinder went in early. Tanith is still at the 'Oh, My'. Leo's working late on that condo project in Marin." She turned back to the early news.

In his room, Thomas shed his clothes with a sigh of relief. He reached for a body brush.

"Vincent Price." Who said the splicers didn't have a sense of humor? He was definitely head lion. He and Lilith brought the most money to the co-op apartment, but Thomas felt his lips curl when he thought of how

they earned it. Oh, he'd had offers enough, some of them damned attractive. He may have been designed as a pet, but he would not be someone's playtoy.

Now Rebinder lent a touch of class as maitre d' at "The Bengali" restaurant. Leo would roll in about eight with sawdust in his mane, cheerfully wrestle Tanith into bed, and then take her to dinner. Bengal tiger and junior lion were justifiably proud of the 'morph boutique their mates ran. Even Vincent and Lil were mated after a fashion. That left Thomas, as usual, odd man out.

"Hey, Pasha," he yelled above the hum of the filter that was catching his shed fur, "how did the interview with the panda go?"

"I'm not impressed," she called back. "We need a real bear at the 'Oh, My', not a teddy bear. Thomas, come out here!" she yelled suddenly. "You're not going to believe this."

Thomas grabbed a hip-wrap and dashed into the living room. Pasha was shaking with suppressed laughter. On the screen the hawk-headed man in Union Square was being interviewed by a local reporter. The conversation was distinctly one-sided.

"... and so we seek to honor and be honored by those in this metropolis who have been so recently been made free of their lives,'" the reporter quoted. "There you have it, folks, the words of Horus, a god of Ancient Egypt who appeared today in the City. Now back to our studio."

A pert face surrounded by blond curls replaced the saturnine good looks of the street reporter. "That was Mario Mendes in Union Square," said Tracie Silver, "with a 'What's Happening' report. For those of you who just tuned in, Mario said he could hear the person calling himself Horus clearly, but due to technical difficulties, our microphones could not. Next, weather, but first this." Pasha hit the remote mute button.

"Would you believe it?" she roared, pounding her heels into the carpet. "The gods of old Egypt have come to save us poor 'morphs? Woo! Do we bow or genuflect? Do they want their offerings burned or raw?"

"I think they accept silver and gold," Thomas replied with a grin.

"Show me a god-shouter who doesn't."

"Yeah. Well, they won't make a fortune selling candy bars."

"How did you know that?" Pasha turned to face him, air masses rolling silently across the screen behind her.

"I met them today, at lunch," Thomas said. "Actually,

I 'met' Thoth, Horus, and Bast. Hey, I bought a couple of Bast's candy bars." He dashed back to his room.

"This light one looks mainly like sesame seeds," he said as he sat on the couch. He studied the back of the wrapper. "Yeah, and the usual stuff, plus . . . What's 'hyssop'?"

"Dunno. An herb, I guess. Ask me about curry."

"OK." Thomas handed the bar to Pasha who slit the end while he read the ingredients of the dark brown bar. An intriguing odor wafted onto the air. "Let's see: barley, barley sugar, dates, some other fruit, and some more stuff I don't recognize. Would you believe frankincense?"

"Why not? What's it taste like?"

"I haven't opened it yet. Hey!" Thomas snatched the remains of the sesame bar from Pasha.

"I only took a little taste," she pouted.

"For you, the whole bar would be a 'little taste'."

"And you," Pasha replied, cuffing him lightly, "would make a nice snack."

"I don't think Rebinder would approve. Look," he said, holding up the bar for Pasha. "See where it should say 'Best before' and a date? It says, 'Bast before.'"

"Bast before what?"

"Blessed if I know."

• • •

The Egyptian gods quickly became old news. Thomas made a point of buying a candy bar from the Bast vendor every day or so.

"Why candy bars?" he asked once.

"Do your gods' priests not hold bake sales?" she replied, licking her nose thoughtfully. She seemed pleased when he showed her the Bast statue he found while investigating an out-of-the-way antique shop.

Then he transferred to the California Street line. That route, he reflected, carried real people. Since it ran from Van Ness through the shopping and financial district to the Embarcadero, the cars filled more at rush hour than on the weekends. His regular riders were bankers and traders, movers and shakers of all ages, all sexes, and several species. He began to recognize them: the spectacled bear and the Nordic woman who sat on the side benches and traded crossword puzzles every morning, the tall Sikh in formal suit and turban, the

granny lady with the knitting basket from which she never knitted, the mysterious woman who always wore a long coat with a hood that concealed her face.

The mystery woman intrigued Thomas. Why did she always wear a coat? It didn't conceal the grace with which she moved. Could she be deformed and not afford surgery? Or just extremely shy? Yet children accompanying their mothers on early shopping trips seemed attracted to her. Since she always sat in the enclosed rear of the car, he couldn't see her face as she played gentle games with them. Twice when she boarded from the front he caught the scent of her perfume. It reminded him of the Bast vendor's natural smell. He began to build a fantasy around her.

On one of the mild summer evenings that San Franciscans deny exist, Thomas enjoyed the feel of the wind in his fur as the car rolled down California. He had traded his uniform for loose walking shorts and open vest that afternoon. The city made allowances. The car was nearly empty as he began the trip up from Market. The mystery lady got on at Sansome, in her coat as always, but she sat on the right hand bench rather than inside. Thomas' nose twitched. How could he start a conversation without frightening her away?

The grip didn't feel right as he picked up the cable at Montgomery, though the cable slid by with its usual smooth hum when they paused at Kearny. His heart began to pound as they headed up the grade toward Grant. His ears buzzed with a sound like a sistrum shaken gently. Over the instrument he heard a sound like ice cracking.

Suddenly the quadrant shattered, most of the stepped arc of metal falling through the grip slot to the street. Without the ratchet locking it to the quadrant, the grip lever flew forward, releasing the cable beneath the rail.

Thomas fell backward as the grip jerked from his hands. He barely caught himself on the frame of the door to the cabin. People looked up, startled, but not yet alarmed.

He threw himself forward, reaching for the track brake lever even as he stood on the curved wheel brake pedal. He hauled the brake lever back, tail beating the floor. The cable car slid back ten feet, then stopped with a jerk amid the smell of burned pine from the brake shoes.

The passengers swayed in their seats. Some cried out as they bruised themselves on seat arms. The mystery woman might have caught herself if the UPS truck hadn't hit the left rear of the car at that instant. She flew from the seat. Still holding the brake lever, Thomas lunged sideways. He grabbed her hood and pulled. She sat down again, hard.

Thomas took a shuddering breath. "Are you all right?" he said.

His heart almost stopped as she turned to look at him. For a moment he thought that a trick of light turned her heart-shaped face the same sorrel color as her short hair. But, no, though her eyes were dilated nearly black with fright, he could see the golden-green of her irises. Slowly her ears rose to their normal position. Thomas noted the delicate tufts at their tips. The near-heat smell of her fright assailed his nose. The Abyssinian 'morph woman gave a tiny smile and fled.

• • •

"... clang! Clangitty-clangclang clang!" The crowd in Union Square applauded as the latest contestant finished his try. The annual Cable Car Bell Ringers Contest was in full swing. Or full clang, Thomas thought, smiling ruefully.

He had come, as he had done everything for the past week, in hopes of seeing the Abyssinian again. None of the passengers on the damage cable car knew who she was. Nor did any of his regular passengers the next day; not even the spectacles bear. He haunted the financial district, asking doormen, vendors, street people. Some had seen her, but no one admitted to knowing who she was or where she worked. He might have been hauled in as a nuisance if the cop hadn't recognized him from the news story. He even approached Bast as a suppliant. She just smiled and gave him a free sample of her latest confection.

A boy of about fourteen solemnly stepped up to the pole where the bell was mounted. The crowd stirred, some going about their business, others arriving in the late summer dusk. Thomas' tail thumped against someone's leg.

"Hi! You going to try?"

Thomas turned toward the familiar voice. Claudia, from the Cable Car Museum souvenir shop, stood next to him. She smiled.

"No, I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"Yeah," said a man on his left, "why not? It's open to anyone."

"He couldn't do worse than that wolf earlier," someone else said.

"Do cats got rhythm?" asked a deep voice behind them.

"You better believe it," said Claudia urging Thomas

forward. "He's a cable car gripman."

Laughing and cheering, the crowd around Thomas pushed him toward the light.

"Name?" asked the rightmost judge from behind the portable table.

"Thomas Winslow."

"Do you know the rules?" asked the woman judge on the left.

"Oh, yes."

"Go to it then, young man," said the first judge.

Thomas stared at the bell for a second. What to do? Well, his standard street crossing warning would do for a start. He'd improvise from there.

With the first clang of the bell, his ears began to hum. He saw the Bast vendor, without her tray, dancing. She accompanied herself with her sistrum while she held an orb in her other hand. He matched the rhythm of his strokes to her dance. The rattle of the sistrum made counterpoint.

A minute or an eternity later Thomas became aware of his surroundings again. The crowd was silent, staring at him. He was sweating lightly under his vest and kilt.

"Any contest?" asked the center judge, who had so far been silent. The others shook their heads.

"Thomas Winslow," said the judge, standing, "it is my great honor to name you winner of this year's Cable Car Bell Ringers Contest. In honor of which we present you with this certificate and this trophy — as soon as we put your name on them." Looking out over the crowd, he said, "I now declare the contest closed! Well," he said, looking at Thomas, "ring the bell!" Thomas did.

Claudia gave him a kiss. People congratulated him and shook his hand. Tanith and Pasha appeared from the crowd and tried to break his ribs with hugs.

"Now what?" Pasha asked.

"I think I'll go down to Fisherman's Wharf and have the biggest, fanciest, fish dinner I can afford," Thomas replied. He realized he was grinning like an idiot and didn't care. "Would you ladies care to join me?"

"Love to!" Pasha exclaimed.

"Uh, uh," said Tanith. "Books."

Pasha growled.

"The auditor's waiting," Tanith said firmly.

Pasha sighed, then gave Thomas a lick. The lioness and tigress dashed off toward the "Oh, My", cutting a wake

through the dispersing onlookers.

Thomas looked around, but Claudia had vanished with the crowd. He shrugged. He was still going to celebrate. He headed toward the cable car turnaround.

The lights of Aquatic Park and Fishermans Wharf were blurring as the cable car started down Russian Hill. Thomas sat on an outside bench, savoring the sea smell in the wind of the car's motion. Damn, he thought, melancholy settling in with the fog, it would have been nice to have someone to celebrate with.

He paid no attention to the slight figure, lightly cloaked against the ocean breeze, that sat next to him until she spoke.

"I'm sorry I ran away from you that night, Thomas," she said. "I should have thanked you then for saving my life, but I was . . . I don't know, in shock, I guess."

Thomas sat frozen while the car stopped at Lombard Street to let someone off. As though his hand moved of its own volition, he reached slowly to pull back her hood. The same heart-shaped face, covered with the finest sorrel fur, he had seen on the ill-fated California car looked solemnly back at him. Her scent, released with her hood, brought the memory of a crowded street corner and a dancing, mischievous smile. Her ear flicked nervously.

"How did you know my name?" he asked.

She smiled. "It was in the paper, of course. And you announced it at the bell ringing contest." She looked away.

"Wait a minute. You mean you've been . . . We've been sitting . . . the whole way?" The car rolled forward. Thomas began to chuckle. The chuckle turned to laughter which he choked back when the other passengers began to stare at them. He looked down to find the Abyssinian 'morph smiling gently at him.

"My name is Abby." Her smile broadened as he rolled his eyes. "That's Abigail Liddington. I work for the Bank of America. I was working late that night." She stopped, took a breath. "There's really no way to say thank you, but, thank you."

"There is a way," Thomas said, "for you to say 'thank you'."

Abby seemed to shrink away from him.

"Will you join me for dinner this evening?" he asked.

Then, because they were going downhill and his arm was lying along the back of the bench, she slid into him and he had to hold her.



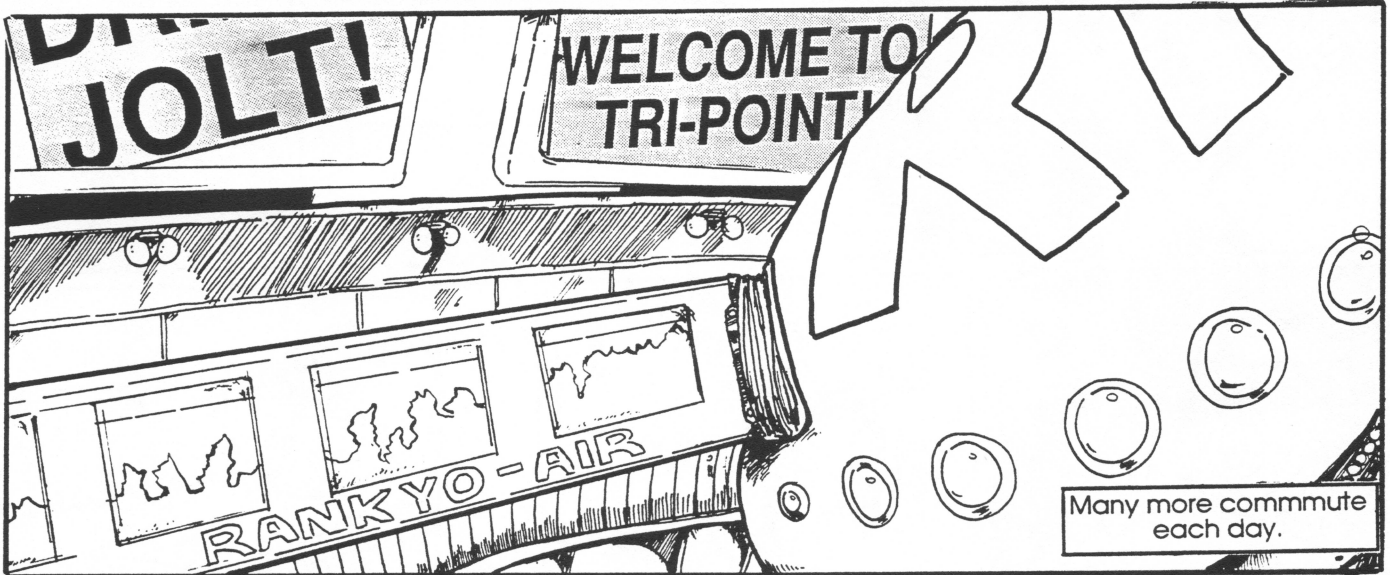
DAVID DUCK

ANY SIMILARITY
BETWEEN DAVID
DUCK AND PEASONS
LIVING IN A BEAR
COULD BE GOOD
FOR A COUPLE OF
LAFFS!

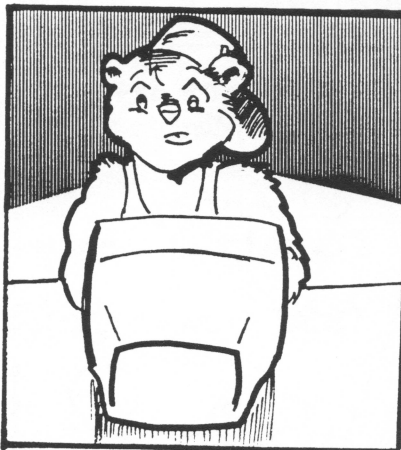
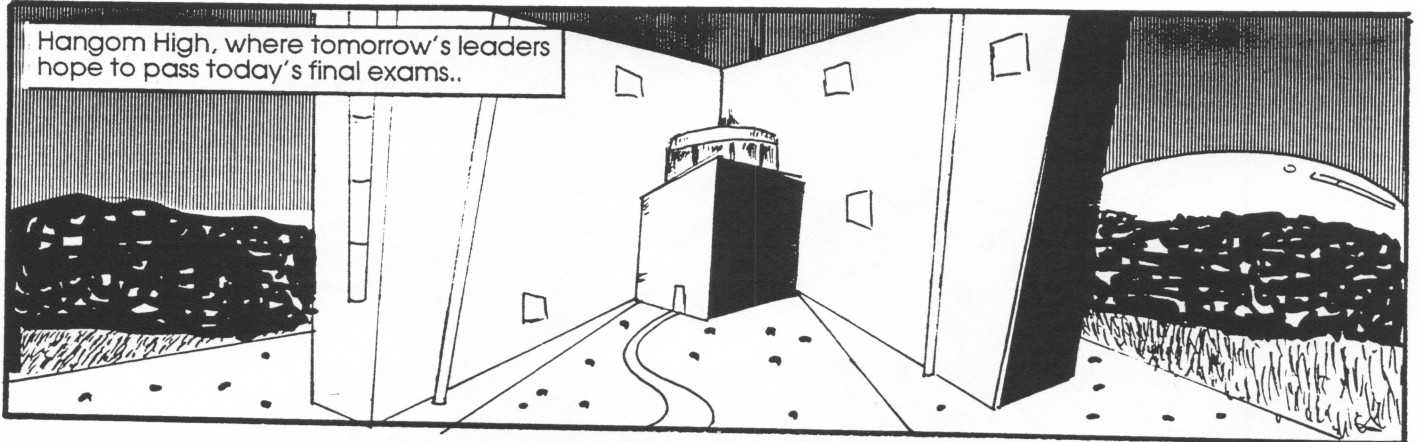
CHARACTER DESIGN 1991 & 1992 BY BUNNICH

BOILER FOOTBALL LEATHER

PRODUCTIONS 1991-1992 - SUNSET



Hangom High, where tomorrow's leaders hope to pass today's final exams..



I LOVE
MY JOB?

CRACK

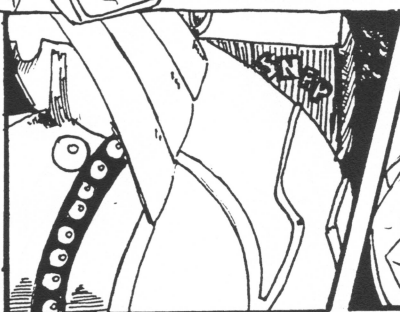
RIP

We are picking up high gamma fluctuations
from hyper-space. Watch for it.



COMPUTER,
ANALYZE.

Analyzing..

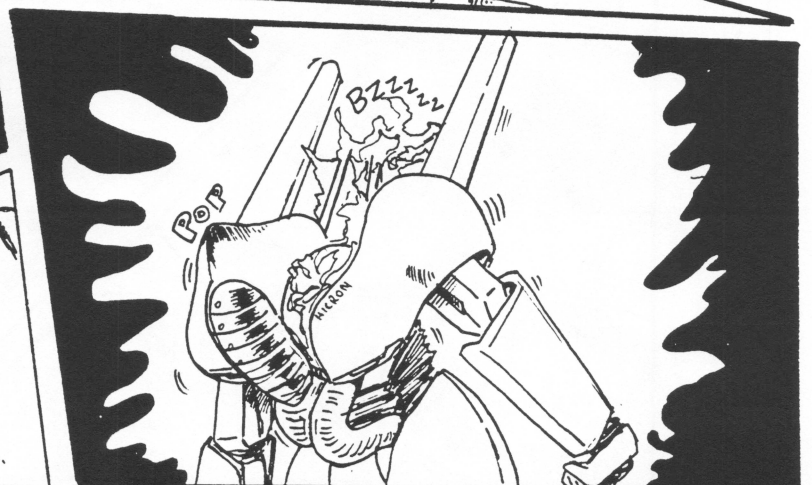
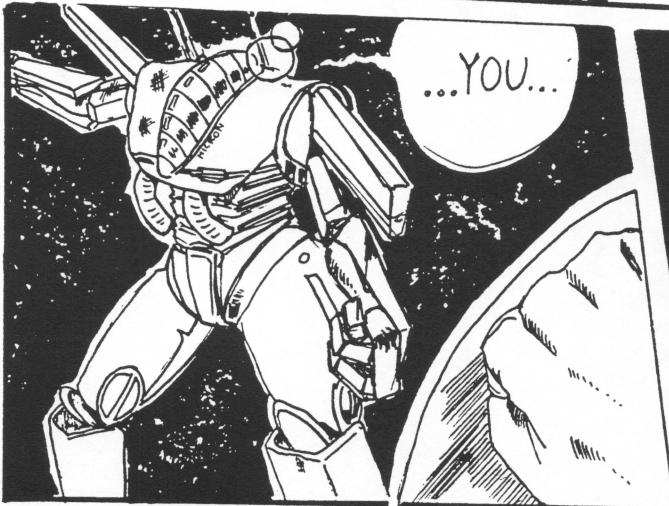
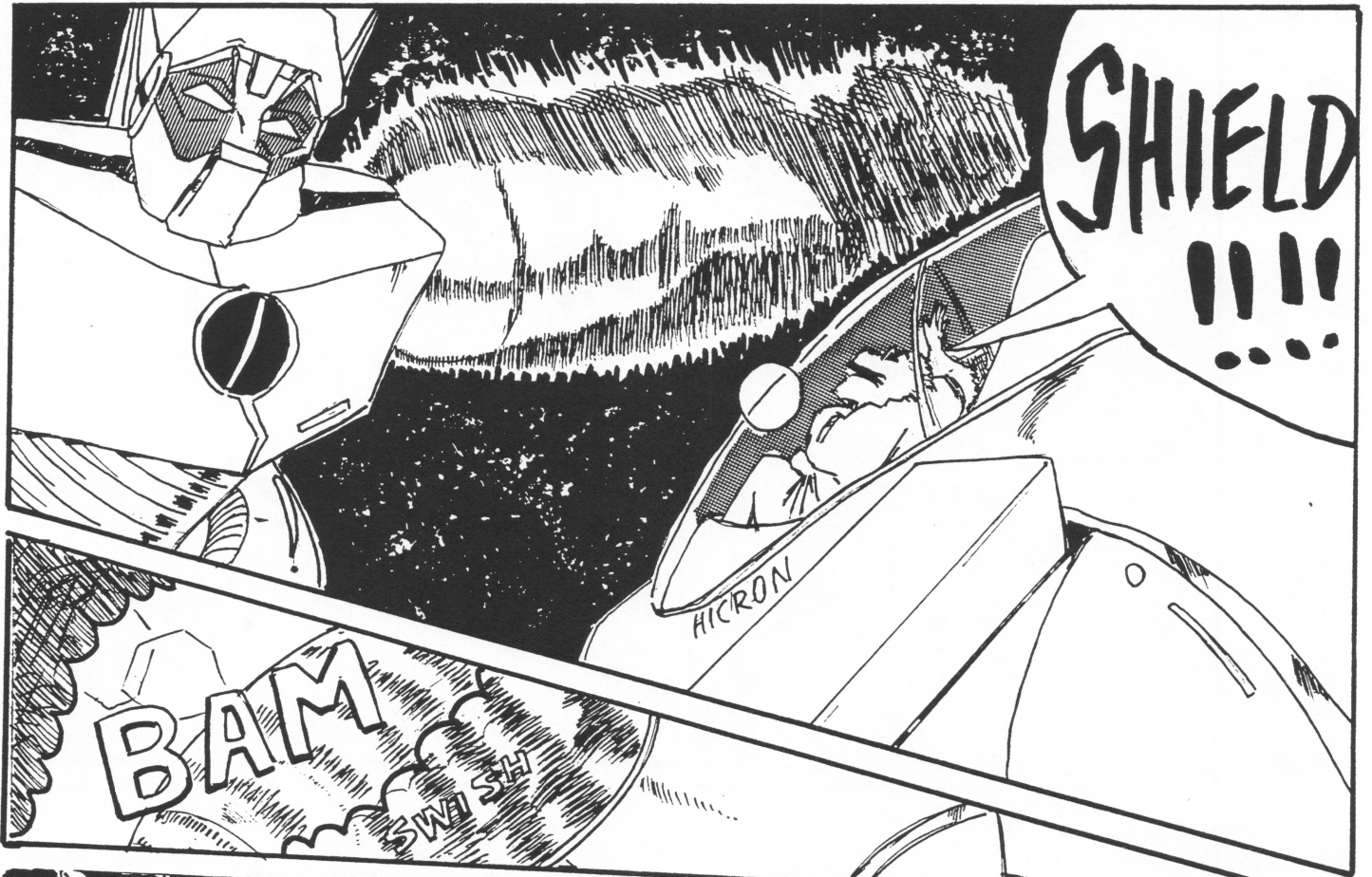
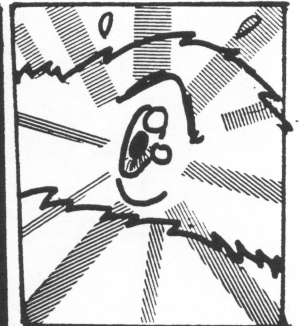
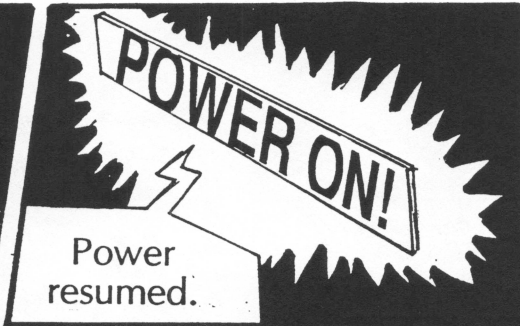


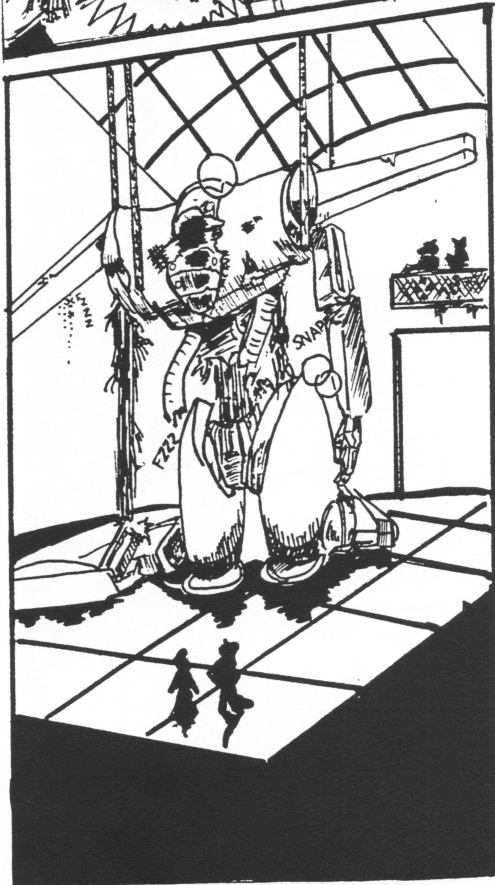
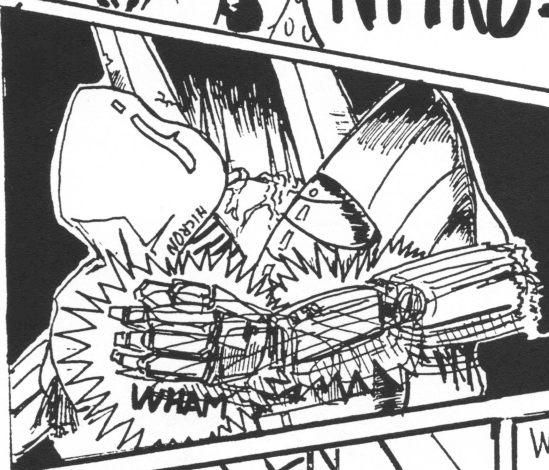
Hicron Mega
series 44 unit.
Height: 468 units
Weight:--

ANalyzing....hzzzztt..ghyuiio...Anal...system error.
Insuffiecient power..souRce..Power down...

WHAT THE F...?
POWER ON
come on, I SAID
POWER ON!

I'M NOT
INTERESTED ABOUT ITS
WEIGHT! SCAN FOR A
WEAKNESS!

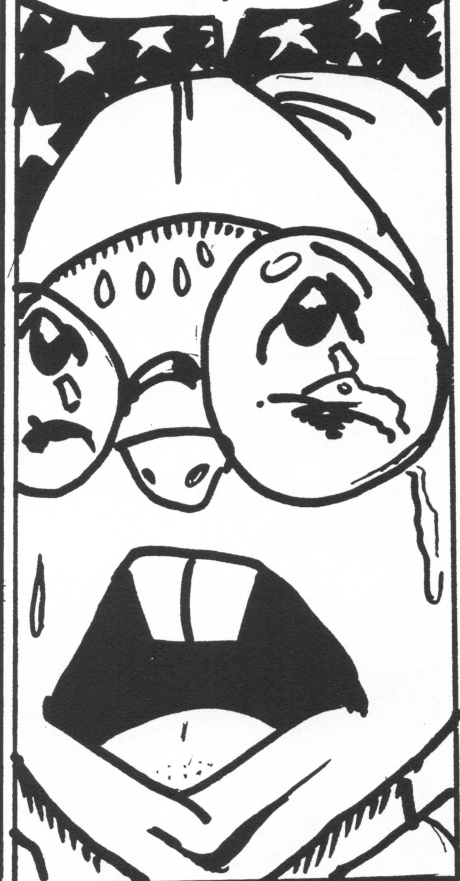


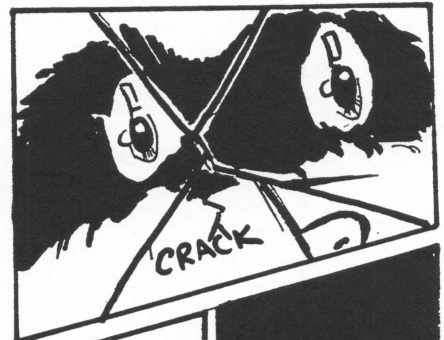
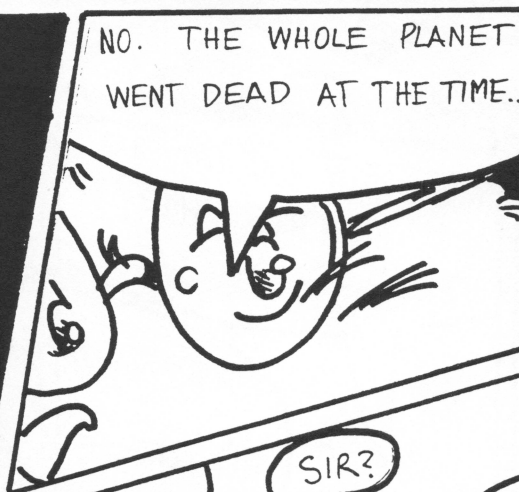
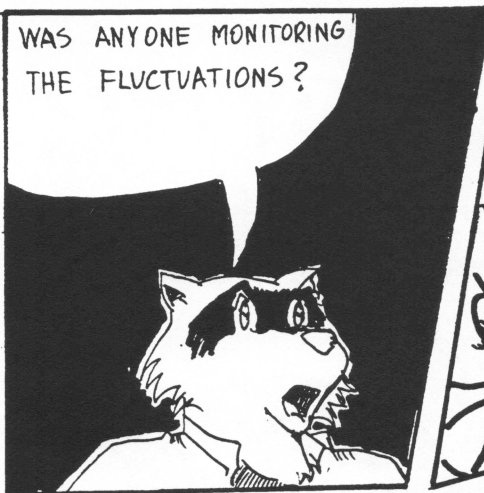
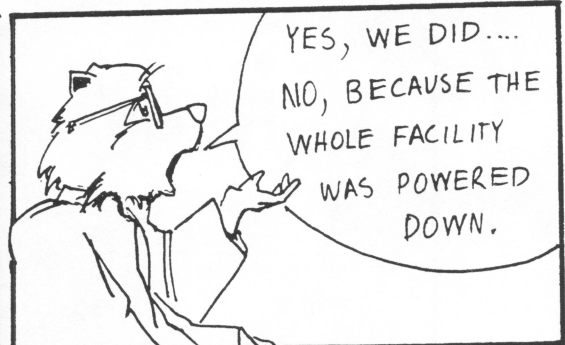
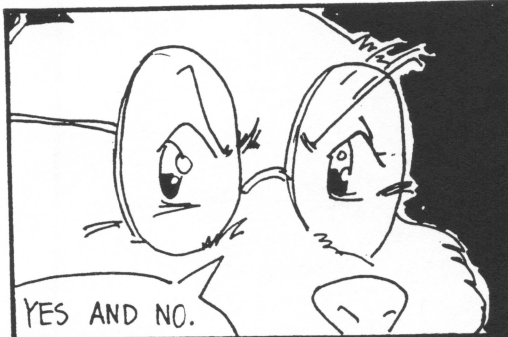
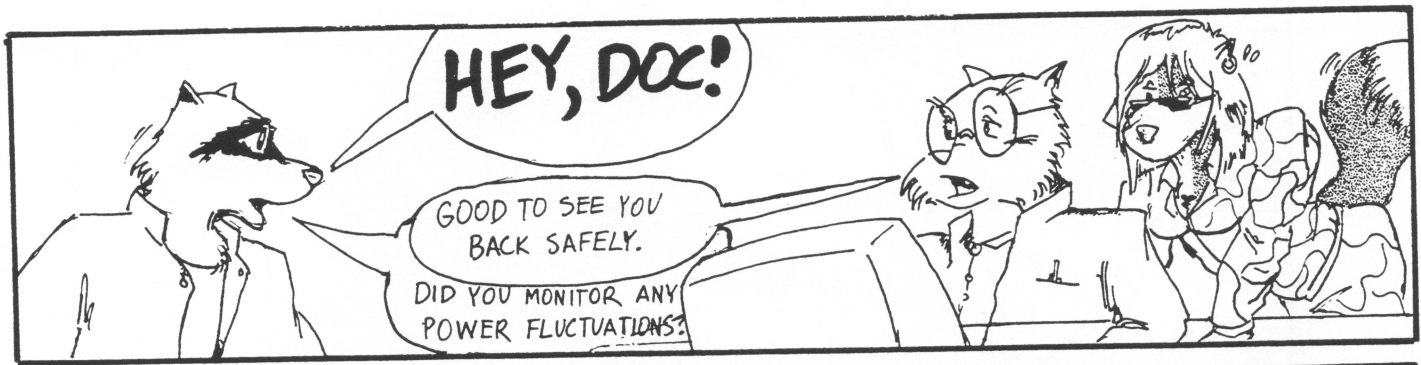


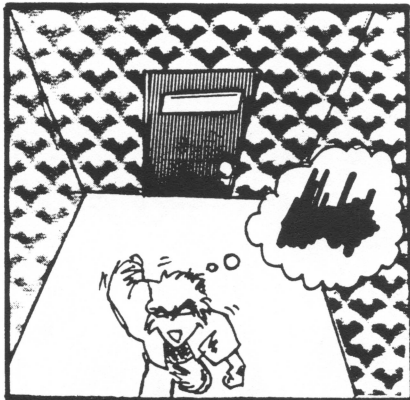
WHAT DID YOU DO TO
IT THIS TIME?

DON'T WORRY.
IT'S INSURED.

WHY ME?





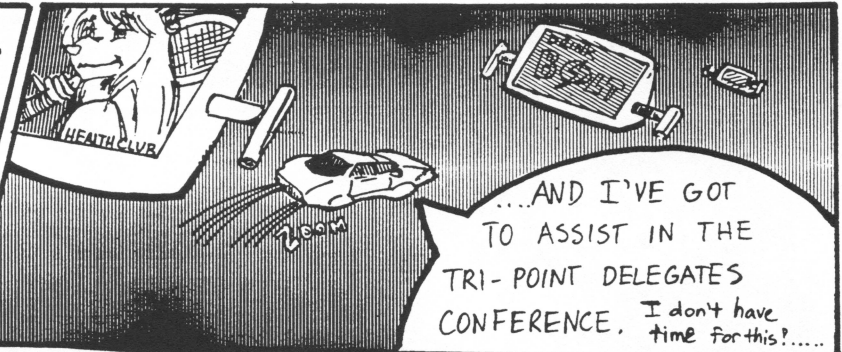


HE CAN'T PUT ME ON
24 HOUR DUTY!
I'VE GOT OTHER
THINGS TO DO!
I'VE GOT
MIDTERMS TO
WORRY ABOUT!

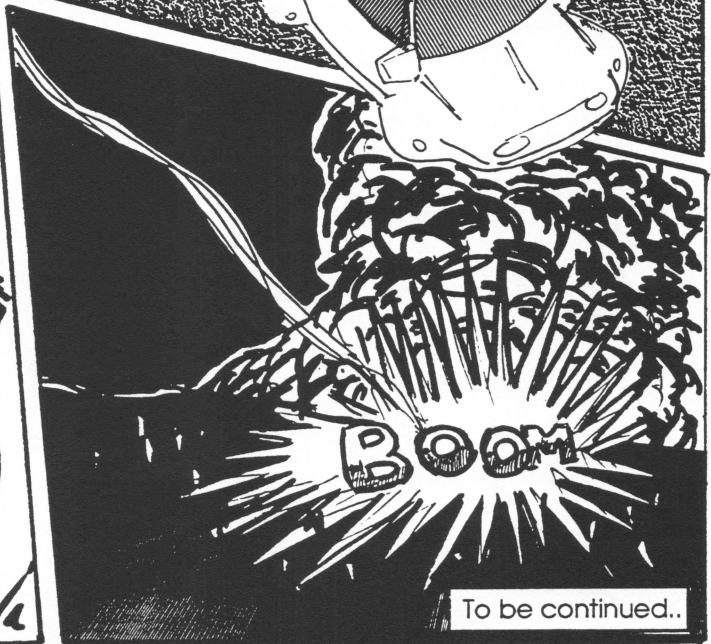
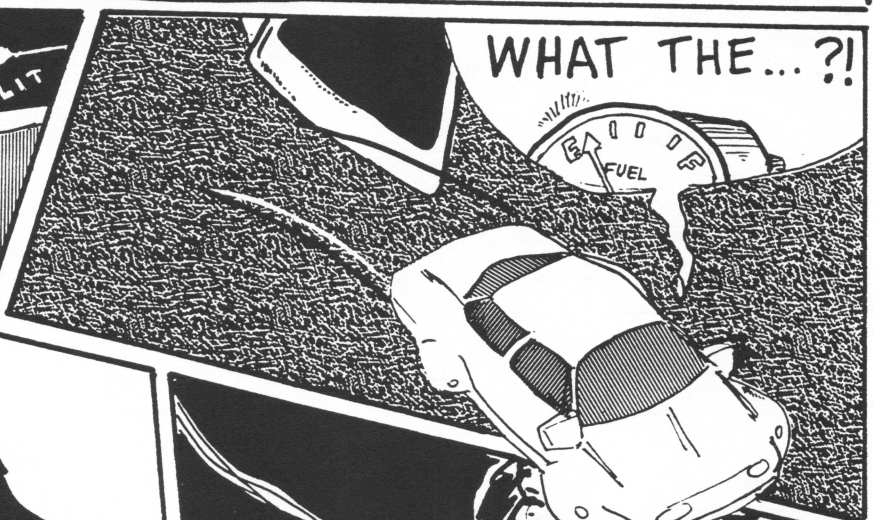
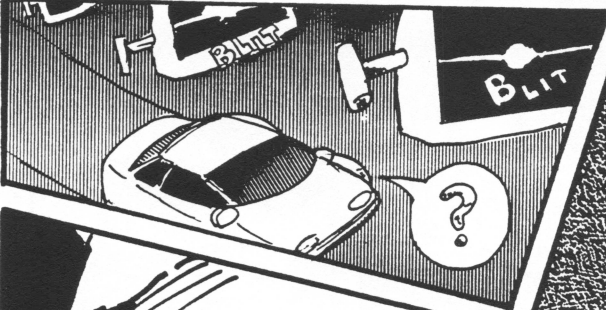


EXIT →

I DON'T NEED
TO BE STUDYING
24th LEVEL PHYSICS
AND GET A CALL TO
DEFEND THE PLANET..
... or something....



....AND I'VE GOT
TO ASSIST IN THE
TRI- POINT DELEGATES
CONFERENCE. I don't have
time for this?....



To be continued..

KEBEK AND KAVINA

KREUTZMAN © 1986

3! 2! 1!...

"TO BOING,
OR NOT TO BOING"

GO!

Y A H O O O O O

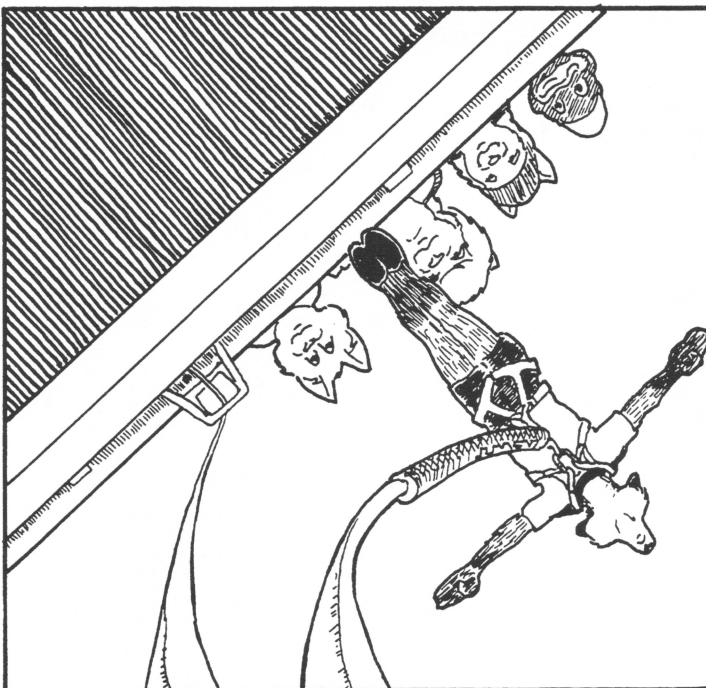
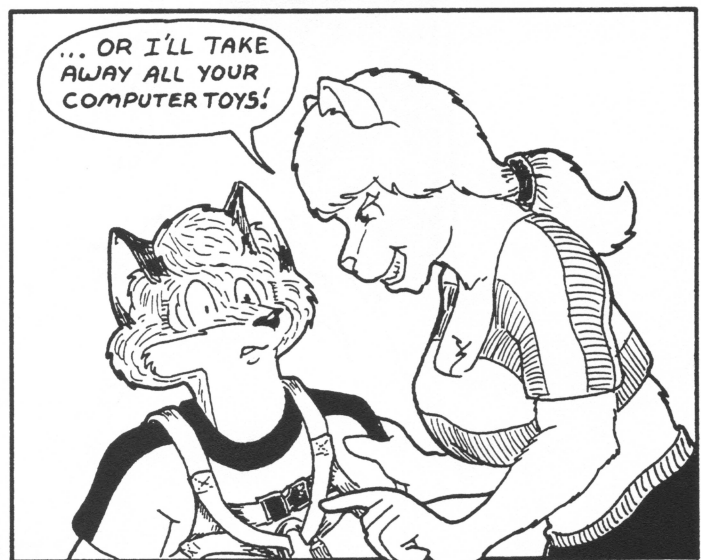
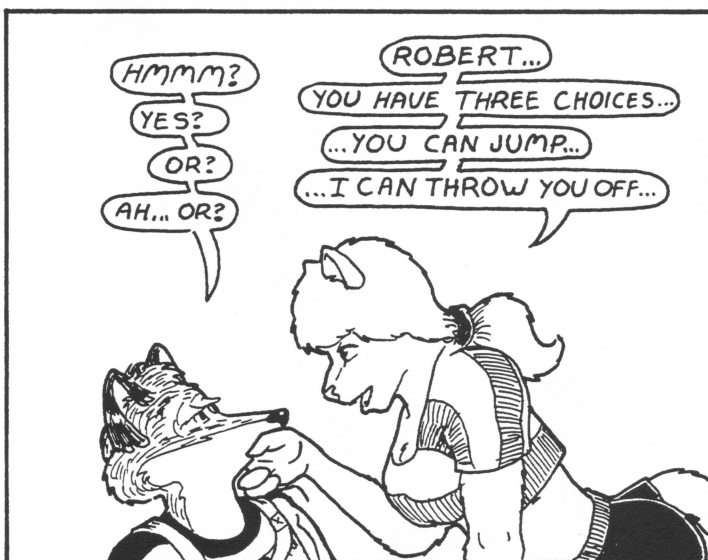
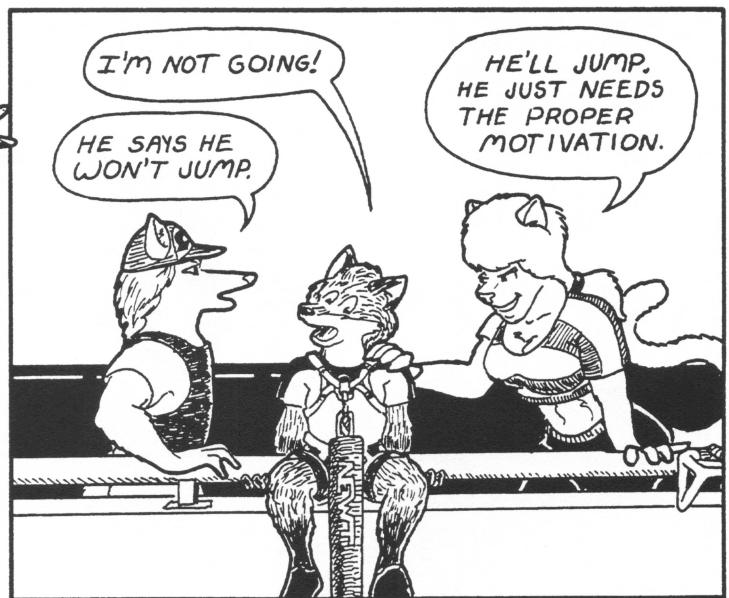
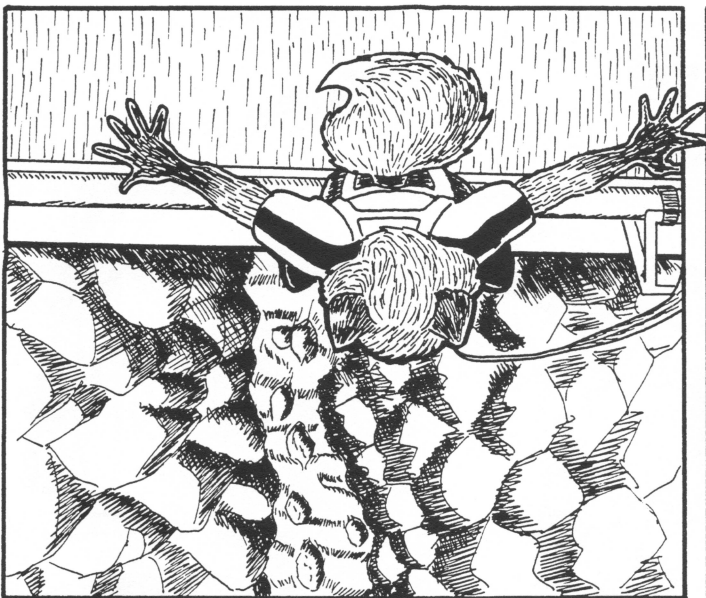
OK. YOU'RE NEXT. LET'S
GET YOU HARNESSSED UP.

SCARED?

ME? SCARED? YES! I
DON'T KNOW HOW YOU
TALKED ME INTO
DOING THIS.

I'M NOT SURE
I WANT TO
DO THIS...

NO WORRY! WE'VE
DONE HUNDREDS
OF JUMPS WITH
NO PROBLEMS.













KREUTZMAN
©9/10/19

The Lighthouse

by Watts Martin
illustrated by Zjonni

Chapter 4

The stoat's eyes keep flicking back and forth between my face and Marn's as he speaks. It's well before noon and I now completely loathe my schedule.

"Well, I could give you the name of the officer who was handling this investigation ten years ago, but it won't really help matters." Barden walks to his desk as he speaks.

I feel a headache coming on. "He might know something that's not in your precious reports. Being retired doesn't make you lose your memory."

"No, but being dead does," he says, sitting down and steeping his hands on the desk. "Tinnor passed away three years after he left the Guard. Died in his sleep. Quite peaceful, really.

"But we hadn't heard of this 'George' person until now." He shifts his gaze to Marn. "Can you tell us anything more about him?"

The fox shrugs and shakes his head. "I've just heard the name."

"But Wortham knows more about him."

He shrugs again.

"You're not all that cooperative."

"He's not all that bright," I say.

Barden drums on the desk, his whiskers twitching slightly. "At least he was smart enough to come here. Beldis, if we're going to protect you, you're going to need to give us your full cooperation. What I'm about to ask will stretch that to the limit. Are you prepared?"

He nods hesitantly.

"All right. Miss Desmera may not have found what we were looking for directly, but you might be just as good. Because you can take us to Wortham."

Marn's eyes widen. "I... I don't...." He gulps. "There'll be guards there. A half-dozen or more."

Barden smiles and presses a button on his desk; a glowing pink dot, the size of a marble, materializes in the air in front of him. "Send me the first two available DMUs, right now," he tells it. The point zips toward the ceiling, then races down a corridor.

"DMUs?" Marn says.

"Dangerous Mission Units," I say. "They're the competent

ones."

He turns back to Beldis. "How many did guards did you say there'd be?"

"Six. Maybe seven or eight."

As if on cue, two Guardsmen come out of the corridor the ball had entered. And two more. And two more. And.... I wait until all of them jog up to Barden's desk, then count them. Twenty-four.

"I don't think that will be a problem," Barden says, standing up. "Shall we be off?"

• • •

It is a scant thirteen minutes later and we are standing behind a warehouse within sight of the dock whose collapse involved me in this operation. I worry about John. I think the priest will be back today. Perhaps he can give John the comfort I am unable to. He knows how to ease the pain. All I can do is try to destroy what causes it.

You're a fairly angry young woman.

Barden leads Marn to the rear, where I stand (let the professionals handle it, Miss).

One of the guards kicks the door open. Two-by-two, we rush through, Barden standing by the doorframe, screaming "Move! Move!" and charging in after us.

By the time I see the three pirates "guarding" this room, all big, burly wolves, they're all down. None of them are dead, just knocked out. I admire the DMU training.

"Fan out!" Barden screams. There are two doors out of the room; twelve Guardsmen go through each one. I wonder how they learned to split evenly like that without taking the time to count? In training: "If you come to two doors and somebody screams 'fan out,' then: you take the left door, you take the right door, you take the left door, you take...."

Barden charges after one group; I walk after the other. Marn stands in the center of the room, looking lost. I grab his hand and pull him after me. "No time to gape. If somebody sees you not trying to kill us—"

"They'll know who squealed that much sooner." He follows me sluggishly.

"What, being a pirate was so much fun you'll miss it?" I get behind him and push: no way he's going to get a chance at my back again. Not yet.

The hallway leads to a lot of doors. They're all being smashed open by Guardsmen. Barden comes into the hall behind us, saying something.

Wortham comes out of one of the closed doors, holding a gun.

I've never seen a gun before. Firearms are illegal in Ranea, period. If you have a gun and you're not an offworld military goon with the required stack of clearance forms, you're in deep trouble.

And trading firearms is a capital offense.

"Stay back," Wortham yells.

Twelve Guards, swords drawn, start moving toward him. He wheels the gun around to face all of them.

Does a gun have twelve bullets?

He lowers the gun, then laughs. "You don't have any business here."

Barden steps forward. "On the contrary. We're here to arrest you, Mr. Wortham."

"On what charges?"

"Fencing stolen property. Extortion."

"Where are your papers? I don't see any papers."

"And," one of the DMU men says as he sheathes his sword, "we have you cold on possession of an illegal weapon."

Wortham looks at the gun in his hand.

"Very stupid," I say. "You don't run out to meet strangers with a gun. Use a crossbow."

He looks at me, shocked, then laughs. "Your word against mine?"

Marn clears his throat and steps forward. He says nothing. He just looks at Wortham sadly.

His former boss stares, then curses under his breath, walking toward the fox. "You?"

"We can have a nice talk here, or a nice talk at the station," Barden says, leaning against a wall.

Wortham just looks at him.

"I'd like to talk you," Barden continues, "about a woman named Marilyn Brown."

The human's expression glazes over, and he sits down on the floor. A Guardsman comes toward him and relieves him of his weapon. "I'm not talking," he says softly. "I'd rather do time than be killed." He looks up at Marn as he says this; the fox closes his eyes and shudders. "And you won't find the records in time." He grins. "There are people out there looking now."

"You know where they are?"

"I have a good idea." He grins again.

Clattering comes from the far end of the corridor, and the other twelve DMU men run in. "The area is secure, sir," the leader says.

"Well, well," the stoat grins. "Looks like you're the only pirate here left capable of standing."

"I'm not talking," Wortham repeats.

"You might get a much lighter sentence. And if you talk enough to put away the people above you, you won't have to worry about retribution. There won't be a pirate ring to take revenge."

"Until they get out."

"They won't get out," Barden says.

Wortham sighs. "I'm not talking."

"All right. I suppose we'll have to find a way to convince you otherwise." The stoat looks dramatically ominous as he says this.

"Article twenty-eight, paragraph four of the Ranean Guard charter forbids someone in the service of the Empire from torturing a prisoner, regardless of the information he may know," Wortham says.

"Very good." He turns to a Guardsman. "In light of Mr. Wortham's great command of law, what would you suggest we do, Jonal?"

"Around-the-clock interrogation is not forbidden by the Charter, sir."

"Possibly. But we may need what he knows now. How about you, Osmath?"

"Search all the records onsite, sir."

"Bureaucratic, but useful. Take five men with you and go into Wortham's office. Tear it apart. And what would you do, Miss Desmera?"

Me? "I think you know what I'd do."

"Share it with us. For the record."

I cross my arms. "Hold him down and start removing his skin inch by inch with my claws until he changes his mind."

Barden shakes his head. "Sounds awfully nasty."

"It is."

"Would you enjoy that, Mr. Wortham?"

Actually, he looks quite pale. His voice is weaker as he repeats, "Article twenty-eight, paragraph four of..."

"I know, I know." Barden waves it aside. Then he looks thoughtful, raises a finger. "Saren."

"Yes, sir," a Guardsman barks.

"Are civilians ever bound by Guard charter?"

"No, sir."

"So if a civilian assisting the Guard did something that..."

didn't quite meet its standards, it wouldn't constitute a violation."

"No, sir."

"It won't work," Wortham says, smiling with a false brightness. "The Charter forbids you to allow a crime in progress to continue. A bunch of Guards standing around watching a prisoner being tortured would be violating that just as much as if they did it themselves."

"You're absolutely right," Barden says, nodding his little pointed muzzle. Then he walks back toward the entrance room. "Men!" he yells. "Retire to the common room!"

All of them start filing toward the door.

"Beldis, you bring up the rear. And," he smiles benevolently at Wortham, "close the door behind you, please."

Wortham bolts for the door, reaching it just as Marn shuts it. The sound of tumblers turning comes from the lock. Then Barden's muffled voice: "Gentlemen. Has searching turned up a pack of cards, perchance?"

Oh, Barden, I underestimated you. When push comes to shove, you can be a bastard with the best of them. I like that in a civil servant.

I walk leisurely toward Wortham, who turns around very slowly. His face has turned paper-white.

As I expected, he tries to run past me. I catch his face with a raised hand, digging the claws in just a little. He doesn't scream, but he makes a gagging noise.

I lower him to the ground in a sitting position, then drop to his lap, my knees to either side of his chest, and rip off his shirt. He tries to throw me off, but I have the leverage; I hold him in place with one hand on his shoulder, pressing him back against the wall.

"Now then." I realize I no longer have to concentrate at looking particularly menacing; over the past week it has become my standard expression. I lay one clawtip on his sternum, tap it a few times, then prick him. He sucks in his breath. I draw the claw down to the end of his breastbone; a thin, ugly line of blood appears in its path.

He looks down at my face, gulping.

"Let's talk about George," I say softly, slicing another line of the same length an inch to the left of the first one, then drawing a third line between them.

He licks his lips, trembling, but still grins. "You're not going to be able to go through with this."

Maybe he's right. But maybe he isn't. I dig my claw down into the short line and hear him bite down on the scream as I wiggle the tiniest flap of skin loose.

Wortham starts hyperventilating. I stick the claw in further, wiggle a bit more, get another half-scream, work a little more skin loose. "Give me another minute and this little flap will be big enough to get my fingers around, and then I can just pull. It'll hurt a little more, though. Or a lot more." I lean

close to his ear for a second. "Ever wondered what a banana feels like when it's being peeled?"

He is a tough one. He doesn't start screaming until I really do start pulling.

Two minutes after that he breaks. "The lighthouse keeper!" he yells.

"John?" I keep pulling.

"No, George!"

"You're not making any sense."

"He was the lighthouse keeper. Before the fucking bear. Stop."

"So you're telling me Marilyn Brown's fence was the lighthouse operator ten years ago."

"Yes. Please—"

I stop pulling. "Look, only an inch off." Wortham is trying, unsuccessfully, not to cry. "Where's George now?"

"Dead. He died before I was in the organization. Oh, fuck." He stares down at the bloody patch on his chest.

"So why's everyone after these records?"

"Brown... she wasn't really a pirate. She was, but she was blackmailed into it."

"How do you know all this?"

He shrugs. "Just heard it."

"That's a poor answer."

He licks his lips. "Don't start pulling again."

"Oh, I'll leave that strip alone. I promise." I take his chin in my hand and yank his face down to my muzzle, my nose touching the spot between his eyes. "If you screw me now, I'll start on your left cheek."

"She... was a pirate. Long ago. Thirty years ago. A gang member. But she left, she ran away. They found her again and blackmailed her."

"With what?"

"Just her past. She didn't want it to come out." He manages a sarcastic smile. "'Pirate' isn't a good reference on a job application."

"Unless you're in government." I think. "Wait a minute." I grab him again. "You said there were people looking for the records now. What do you mean?"

He smiles, almost victoriously. "The fox isn't the only person I have under me. One way or another, it's gonna end today."

I shake him. "Who has the records?"

"There's only one person alive who she could have given them to."

"John doesn't have them! He didn't know she was a pirate!"

"Either they sank with Brown, or she gave them to somebody before she died. Who do you think that somebody's going to

be?"

You stupid bastard. I smash his face into the wall, then get up and knock on the door. "We need to go now!" I yell.

• • •

The turtle is back.

We are running as a group to the lighthouse. Rather, they are running; I am preparing to fly. The turtle appears from a side alley, apparently just passing through.

"Did you find Michael?" he says, apparently oblivious to the sight of twenty DMU men charging down a street, a detachment of four walking behind with a bound prisoner. I told Barden to bring Wortham with us. I don't know if he will. A prisoner is a liability.

But I want him there so I can kill him if anything happens to John.

"He's right up there," I snap, pointing at the stoat as I crouch down.

Turtle looks where I point. "No, he's not a stoat. I'm sure he's not a stoat." He blinks. "Where are you going?"

"Weryse Point."

"Why?"

I grab him by the neck and pull his face toward me, causing the first truly startled expression I've seen on his face to appear. "Because if I don't get there now, a friend of mine may die! Got that?"

He blinks and stutters a bit. I don't wait for the answer. The flight will only take a minute.

Thirty seconds. Twenty. The lighthouse is in sight, and I think the door is open. Oh, John....

The ground hits me too hard, but I run inside before I've recovered, panting and gasping. "John!"

I am too late.

The room has been destroyed. None of the furniture remains intact; papers and shredded pillows, splinters of wood, litter the room. John is splayed against one wall, breathing raggedly. His beautiful uniform is a tattered, bloody mess, and he bleeds from a nasty head injury.

I'm by his side, rolling him over. His eyes are glassy, but there is recognition in them. "R..." he starts to say. "Revar." He coughs, and a trickle of blood comes out his mouth.

"It'll be okay," I whisper, knowing it won't be.

"Don't... have records," he wheezes.

"I know."

"Couldn't just... leave old man alone." He closes his eyes.

I take his hand and squeeze it. "John, listen to me. This is important. Marilyn was blackmailed."

"Hmmm?"

"She didn't want to be a pirate. She was blackmailed. She had... done some bad things before she met you, and I think she was afraid that the pirates would tell you if she didn't help them."

A tear runs down his face. "Could have... told me," he gets out. "Oh, Marilyn."

There is no way I can move him, get him to a doctor. Suddenly there is a noise at the door, and Turtle zips inside.

"How'd you get here this fast?" I say without looking up.

"Caffeine," he says. He looks down at John. "Uh—"

"Do you know any doctors who could get here fast?"

"Yes." He disappears, almost a blur, as soon as the syllable hits the air.

I sit there, holding John's hand. He strokes mine gently with his other hand. "Been a good friend," he whispers. "Thank you."

"I wish I had been here a half-hour ago."

"Couldn't know." He goes into a wracking coughing fit; I lean down, partly covering him with a wing, and he smiles.

But I should have known, John.

At some point before I move again, the Guard arrives. "Get a doctor," Barden immediately barks at one of his men.

"I already sent for one," I say softly.

"Did they get the records?"

"John doesn't have them."

"Then—"

I sigh and straighten up. "Check the walls."

Barden looks at me, then nods at his men. They immediately fan out, knocking against the walls.

"What..." John mumbles.

"Shhh," I whisper, stroking his head. "Wortham guessed wrong. He got the location right, but not the person."

"Nothing, sir," a Guardsman says.

"What are you getting at?" the stoat demands.

"Check the stairs, the floors. Anything," I say to the Guardsman. In another minute, Guards are removing each step on the staircase and knocking against the floors.

I look up at Barden. "Marilyn wouldn't have given the list to John because she didn't want to risk him looking at it. She gave it to someone else."

"Sir!" a Guard yells. "This stair is a latch!"

"Pull it," he says, his eyes on me.

There is a click from underneath the staircase, and a crack appears in the wall underneath it.

"Marilyn couldn't have gotten all those names by herself; she

wasn't high enough in the organization. She had to have help from George—the man who ran the fencing operation from this lighthouse ten years ago."

"Why?"

I shake my head. "Why George was helping? We'll never know. Corpses never share secrets. Maybe he just wanted out, too."

The records are in the little room, of course, along with George's private cache of stolen property and weapons. The Guard who finds the small book hands it to Barden, who flips through it.

"George?" John whispers weakly. His body is shaken by a new cough.

"Look at this," the stoat says, showing me a page of the book.

It has a single name on it, with a date ten years old and a time. "What is it?"

"The name of the officer who was investigating the pirates then. Marilyn Brown was going to be an informant."

I flip back through the book. "She missed that meeting, didn't she?"

"Looks like it. That investigation never went anywhere. There were a few anonymous tips, but nothing ever happened with them."

Suddenly a name leaps out at me from one page. The name is: Cayne Wortham. He said he wasn't a pirate back then—

I start shaking. "John," I say, "how did Marilyn die?"

"Accident," he says. "She was out alone... boat capsized."

Or it looked that way.... Should I tell him?

"She was going to go to the Guard, John," I say softly. "She was a good woman after all."

After a moment, he smiles, nodding. He squeezes my hand, then relaxes limply.

Turtle reappears a half-minute later, leading a bemused-looking female human by one hand.

"My God," she says, running toward John. "Get the stretcher in—"

"You don't need it." I bend over and kiss John's battered forehead. "He already left."

I shut his eyes, stand up and walk out of the lighthouse.

• • •

The party of Guards watching Wortham stand just off the point. I can hear the stoat following me, but it doesn't matter. A lot of people seem to be following me. It doesn't matter. I walk up and stand before Wortham.

"You killed Marilyn," I say without preamble. "And George."

The prisoner looks at me, his hands bound in front of him, and shrugs.

I rip his shirt off. A Guard puts a restraining hand on my shoulder; I ignore it.

My voice stays level. "This is for his wife." I grab the loose flap of skin and rip down. He screams and tries to double over.

I extend my hand, palm upward, claws out. "This is for John." A quick move and my hand is buried in his gut up to the wrist. It comes free with an awful noise, and Wortham falls to his knees, making only a faint moaning noise.

One of the Guardsman retches. Two more grab me as blood starts to spatter from the wound and Wortham falls face down, a dark pool quickly spreading across the ground.

"What should we do, sir?" a Guard asks as Barden approaches me.

He stares at the dying man, then clears his throat. "He was trying to escape, wasn't he?"

After a moment, the Guard nods and turns away. The two who are holding my arms release me.

The priest is walking toward us. Where'd he come from? No matter. Everyone is here now, come to see the bat who heroically dispatched a bound prisoner. Oh, God....

"John's dead," I say simply. "I guess I wasn't there for him enough." I turn to face Barden. "I'm leaving now." I start walking toward the city.

Soon I realize that the priest and Turtle are following me.

"Shouldn't you be tending the dead?"

"I'm tending the living," the otter says. "If they want it."

I shrug.

"Marilyn wasn't a pirate by choice," I tell him. "They blackmailed her. She was going to turn them in, all of them, I suppose. Now that they have the records the ring might be finished."

"So John dies knowing his wife's name is cleared. If you believe in an afterlife, it's a happy ending."

"And what do you believe?"

"I could have saved him. If I hadn't been so busy being a one-woman army. I should have spent the night with him. I shouldn't have gone after Wortham in the first place." Suddenly I am crying.

The priest reaches up to wipe away a tear; I knock his arm away, nearly throwing him onto the ground.

"Are you afraid of crying?" he asks softly.

"I've never done that before."

"Cry?"

"Really... torture someone. I threatened to take off his face piece by piece. And I would have done it." I have become very cold. I stop in the middle of the street and wrap my

wings around myself. "I don't want to be like this."

I realize I am crying harder now. "It's hard enough knowing everyone thinks of you as a monster. Now I'm really becoming one."

The otter puts his hand on my back and rubs gently. Suddenly we are hugging each other.

"Of course!" Turtle shrieks.

I look over at him, but he is already gone, a blur moving down the street.

"Do you want me to take you somewhere?" the priest says.

"I want to go to a bar."

"Drinking might not be a good idea for you right now."

"I want company," I sigh.

He nods. "All right. My church is right up here, though; we should stop and clean you up." He looks down at himself; his robes are now stained with Wortham's blood, too. "And me."

• • •

The priest is still here, at least four hours after we came back to the Wyvern's Den. I am on my fifth lemonade.

I have told him about my life in Rionar, about Mika, about the

drunken state I spent my first week in Raneadhros in, about more things than I've shared with my closest friends. Then the desperate need to talk passed, and we sat and sipped our drinks.

Breaking a silence that has stretched since the last time my glass was refilled, he says, "I think you're afraid that you don't care."

"I've never cared about much. It's not in my nature."

"Oh, but you did. You cared about Mika. And before that, you cared about Jemara. And through it all, you cared about life."

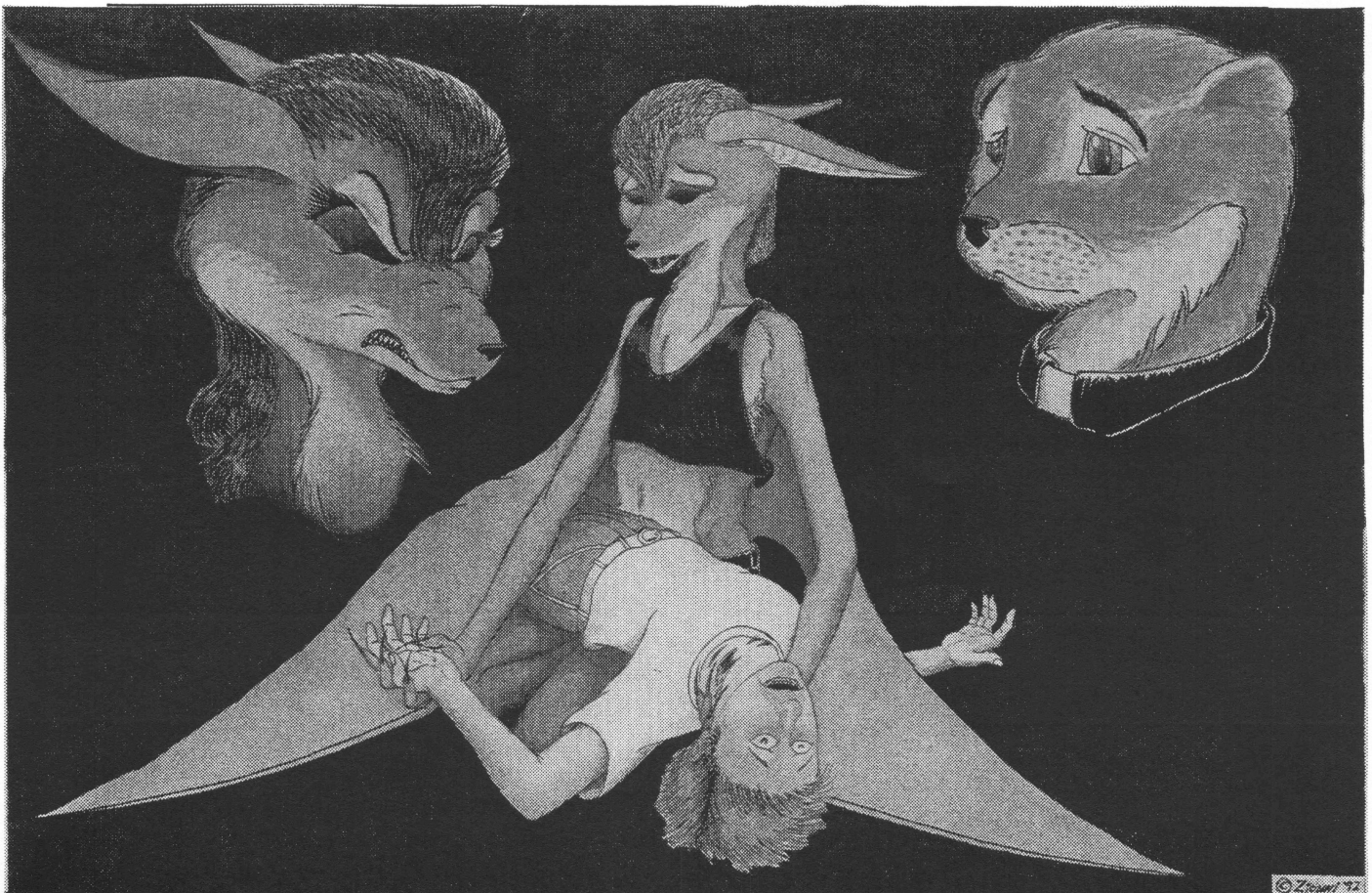
"I remember the story you told me yesterday. If you were as uncaring as you'd like me to believe, you wouldn't be able to remember that little boy's face."

"I've met people who have lost the ability to truly care. At best they've replaced caring with covetousness; they care about their money, or their power, or people they've accumulated as status symbols. All of them were every bit as monstrous as you see yourself to be right now."

"I can't imagine even the coldest businessman casually ripping someone's gut open in front of a squadron of Guardsmen."

"Not literally, no."

You're so maddeningly—friendly. "Doesn't that bother you?"



"Yes, of course it does. But you're better than some of those cold businessmen. You see what's happening to you and you don't like it."

"And?"

He leans forward. "And the irony is, you're completely, utterly wrong."

I stare at him, feeling slightly numb.

"The way you described meeting your Mika. You were killing someone, and in just as nasty a fashion. Why? Because you cared about the person he had wronged. And that's the same reason you killed, and even tortured, that prisoner today. Your only problem is that you care so much about your friends, you're willing to kill for them. Even if I'm bound to condemn your actions, I wish more people in the world had your motivations."

I sit back in the booth. "Then why did doing those things make me feel this way?"

"I'm no psychologist. My best guess is that you care so much about Mika, you're losing the ability to care about yourself. You don't have anything to believe in. And, if you'll forgive the expression, that truly is a sin."

"I suppose you'd tell me the church could help."

He smiles. "It could."

"How?"

"I always have something to believe in."

"You've never met any monsters with faith?"

He shakes his head. "I've met a fair number who attend services. But it's not the same thing at all." He slides out of the booth. "You know where to find me if you need to talk. I'm about two hours late for an hour-long prayer meeting right now, though."

"Thank you," I force myself to say. He smiles briefly, then reaches down and hugs me before scampering out of the pub.

It is another drink later, this one a coffee (I am still debating whether or not to have any alcohol), when Turtle bounces up to me yet again.

"See, Murr was in here the other night, like four days ago," he begins, "and she was telling me about a guy staying with Wezip. Well, actually two guys staying with Wezip. Did I mention it wasn't Michael at all? But you know that already. You know, I'm really glad you're in here right now!" He nods approvingly.

I backtrack over what he just said a few times, trying to decide on the correct response. Then I look him in the eye and very solemnly say, "What the fuck?"

"Murr's a friend of mine. That doesn't really matter. The point is, everything I was trying to tell you was second- or third-hand. I just put it together with you because you're the only new bat in town I know, and then when I found out the right name was Revar, everything made sense."

"Tell me in five words or less."

The reptile blinks, and mumbles under his breath, "One two three four..." Then he says, loudly, "He's standing right over there." He looks happy. "Five words."

"What?"

"Oh, just come on." He grabs my hand and yanks me out of the seat. "The name wasn't Michael, it was Mika. That rings a bell, doesn't it?"

But.... I look down at Turtle, feeling a tingly shudder. "No. I killed him."

"Killed who?"

"M-Mika."

"Really?" He drops my hand, looking confused, then waves a finger in the air. "This is the heart of the problem, see. But don't take my word for it." He pushes me toward the bar, pointing at a stool. A fox sits there, talking with someone who has his back toward me. A... spotted tabby cat?

"He's awfully active for a corpse, wouldn't you say?" Turtle looks absurdly pleased with himself and pushes me closer. "Hey!" he yells at the fox. "She was here after all, hiding in the corner!"

The fox stands up, and the cat turns around—

You can't be—

Turtle is suddenly supporting me from behind. Then, in an instant, Mika is pulling me upright. I am gaping at him stupidly, mouth open. He is trembling in the same way he did when I was dying in his arms a lifetime ago.

And when he was dying in mine.

Then we are in each other's arms.

Now we move to a booth, still holding on to one another. Part of me is conscious of the people staring and grinning at us. A different part wonders if perhaps I should believe in miracles after all.

When I am sitting and staring at him, it finally comes out. "How... are you still alive? I k-k..." The word sticks.

He pulls my head against his shoulder, making soothing noises as if I was a little girl. "You didn't," he says softly. "Almost." Mika continues briefly with the story of his rescue, his decision to leave Rionar. And Dahlu.

Through it I am thinking: can you forgive me? But the question doesn't need to be asked. You are here with me. I stay pressed against him.

"I've been looking for you for days," he is saying. "We got here five days ago. Donthen, the bartender, said you were in there the night before that, but you weren't anywhere to be found. Where have you been?"

I rub my eyes. "Was that the night the dock collapsed?"

He blinks. "Yes, I heard about that. Were you...?" He doesn't finish the sentence, just stares at me.

"Turtle," I call to the reptile—he is standing nearby listening. We are evidently the afternoon's entertainment. "Could you get me a drink?"

"What do you want?"

For telling the story of John and the lighthouse, so soon after living it? "Bourbon. Straight."

• • •

I finish the story and my second bourbon at the same time. "I feel like... a demoness." Oh, kitten, how can you still like me now that I've become this way?

Mika strokes my leg gently; we are still holding one another, his warmth nourishing me far more richly than mere blood could ever do. "I wish I had found you sooner." He kisses me softly on the cheek.

"The good guys came out ahead. Except for John." I laugh bitterly.

"I don't know what to tell you, love. You can't blame yourself for only being mortal."

"No." I close my eyes and lean back into the booth's cushions. "Have I always been this way?"

"The most important lesson I learned from you was to have faith in yourself. You still have faith in what you can do. You just need to regain faith in what you are."

"And what is that?"

He puts his arm around my neck and hugs me to him. "I believe the phrase you used was 'scary bitch.'"

I laugh. "That's not very comforting."

"You like being a scary bitch. You told me so yourself."

I try not to laugh this time, not entirely successfully. "That's not fair."

"That reminds me. There's something I've been waiting to do for weeks."

"Which is?"

He smiles mischievously, then suddenly pulls me into his lap. Before I can react, he bites me on the neck.

"Ow!" But it doesn't hurt, not exactly. He isn't drawing blood. In fact, it's kind of... erotic.

When he lets go, he pulls back and stares at me, nose-to-nose, smiling.

"You're supposed to subdue your prey first," I say. "Otherwise she might be able to take advantage of you."

"Show me that this evening." He kisses me, not so lightly, on the end of my muzzle, his tongue briefly touching one fang before withdrawing. "But we need to go somewhere right now."

I blink, feeling a little woozy from the intimacy we had never

dared before. "Where?"

"An eye doctor's." He gets up from the table, extending his hand to me. "Do you still feel like a monster?"

"Part of me does."

"How does the other part feel?"

I ignore his hand and pull him down to me, enfolding him with my wings. "Alive."

• • •

The weasel who is examining me has just had me close one eye, then the other, and describe a color chart. Now he is examining my eyes with some sort of lens.

"What you have," he announces, "is a condition called protanopia."

"Which is?"

"Essentially, your eyes see color by breaking them up into three basic colors: red, blue and green. Protanopia is a visual defect in the part of the eye that senses red. You're an interesting case; I've never seen someone who developed protanopia as a result of an accident before."

"So what happens now?"

"In two or three days, maybe even by tomorrow, your left eye will be seeing perfectly again. No treatment necessary."

"When will my right one return to normal?"

He shakes his head. "It won't."

"What?"

The doctor sighs. "I'm sorry, Miss Desmera."

"There's nothing you can do?" Mika says.

"I'm afraid there's nothing anyone can do. The kind of healing magic that can work on that small a scale is phenomenally difficult. It's far harder than, say, repairing a defective kidney. And that's not a cake walk to begin with."

"And beyond that, magic can't replace dead cells with live ones. Essentially, the light bleached all the red pigment from your eyes to a point where it burnt away the part that can make more. Your right eye will simply never see things in true colors again."

"Wonderful." I feel absurdly crippled.

"Well, in the long run it could be far worse. Honestly, it's surprising that you don't have complete permanent blindness in one or both of your eyes. The fact that only one of them has any permanent damage at all is nothing short of a miracle."

"Thanks."

He pats me condescendingly on the shoulder and moves off.

"You never told me your last name," Mika says as we get up.

I smile a little. "It never seemed important. I still don't know yours, kitten."

• • •

Finally we are back in my hostel room. Mika has told me he is staying with the fox I met briefly, Wezip, a friend of Jack's. I sit down on the bed and he sits next to me, pulling my head toward his shoulder and purring softly.

He smiles. "You have very pretty eyes."

"I have pretty scary eyes." But I love the compliment.

"All right, I admit it!" He pulls me down on the bed beside him. "I find scary things attractive." As he speaks, he starts stroking my thigh with his claws, nuzzling my neck. And making it very difficult for me to pay attention to his words. "I like sharp claws and fangs."

I smile and return his stroke, but hesitantly. Why am I suddenly nervous? I don't think I have moved, but I am clutching Mika to me desperately. "I love you so much...."

He holds me awkwardly, wrapped tightly in my wings, just placing his hands on my waist. "I love you, too." He presses his cheek to my own. I am beginning to cry.

Mika gently disengages himself from me, then wraps me in his arms, holding me tightly, pressing my head against his warm, soft chest. Oh, love. I am crying much harder now, feeling my tears being trapped in his fur and held against my cheek.

"It's all right," he says, gently laying me out on the bed, still holding me. His touch calms me, stripping away something that has been entangling me since I recovered that night to find him dying beside me. It isn't all gone, not yet. Not for a while. But now, for the first time, I believe it will be.

"You saved my life again," I whisper, closing my water-filled eyes.

Mika continues to rub me. As I relax he moves closer. I begin to feel a little nervous again, but it is a different kind of tension. Opening my eyes, I smile at him; his face is very close to mine, moving closer—touching my cheek. "I've waited a long time for this," I say softly. "Just lying here with you...."

"I remember when we almost kissed in the park that night." He smiles. "You stopped me then." He leans over me, placing his hand on the other side of my head, and touches his nose to mine.

"I'm not stopping you now."

"No, you're not," he says, smiling gently. I can hear his heart beating very loudly; he is just as nervous as I am as our mouths meet, once, again— He licks all the way around my muzzle, running his tongue over my teeth.

I begin to feel kind of warm and silly. "Stop that," I say, giggling.

"Or what?"

"Or—" Very good question, that. I don't catch myself in time to stop another giggle.

"Now, how are you going to keep up the bitch image if you giggle?" Mika admonishes. He slides his hand under my dress's shoulder strap. "If you're not careful, people might start thinking you're nice."

"I'm not nice," I protest.

Mika gently pulls the dress to one side. "You are. You're one of the nicest people I've ever met."

I grab his neck mock-threateningly. "You better not let it get out, dammit."

He smiles and sticks his tongue out, then moves his hand down to cup my breast in his palm. The warm and silly feeling is turning into a hot and prickly one. He rubs a little. Mmmm. His finger traces a circle around the nipple. "Or what?" he repeats.

"Or I'll be forced to have my way with you."

"Oh." He smiles and pulls the other shoulder strap off, then bends down and touches his tongue to the second nipple, moving his hand down my thigh and under what little of my dress is still on. Oh, don't stop that. "Is there anything I can do to guarantee you'll have your way with me?"

I circle a wing around him and breathe into his ear. "You're doing a good job now."

He removes his hand from my leg, reaching down to the snap on his pants.

"Put that back there," I command. I reach around him with both hands and rip his shirt off, then his pants, and throw the pieces to the side. Then I reach to his underpants. I rip them off as well, making sure I stay in contact with him as long as possible. He shudders a bit as my hands move.

"But now I don't have any clothes. I won't be able to leave tonight," he says.

I shake my head in mock disappointment. "I'll just have to keep you up all night."

He rolls over, pushing me prone and burying his face in my breasts, gently pulling off the rest of my dress. "I'm supposed to be the aggressive one," I protest.

Mika chuckles, then begins doing amazing things with his hands. As he plays with me, the heat throughout me intensifying, I pull him up my body and cocoon him tightly within my wings. "Urmf!" he says, pausing momentarily.

"Don't stop now," I command.

"And what'll you do if I do stop?" he responds, rubbing his stomach between my thighs and bringing his hands around to oh!

I pull him further up my body, nibbling on his ear and doing the same things with my claws he is doing with his fingers. He gasps. "Considering I'm five times stronger than you," I

murmur, "I'd say I could do anything I want to."

"Good point." He proceeds to ohhh!

As we explore each other's bodies we begin to move. The fire within me grows. Can you feel it? Of course—you are its source.

We roll over, shift. Your body is there just for me. My body becomes defined by what you are doing with it.

What is happening—what I am feeling—scares me more than the very first time I made love. And thrills me more deeply.

I moan, gasping, at what your fingers do, stroke and touch to see if I can arouse you further as you pant and shudder under me. "Please," you say, eyes shut, almost howling.

Not... yet... do that a little harder. Oh! yes—

As I straddle you—holding myself above your thighs—ready to take you and be taken by you—

"Ohh, kitten..." I gasp/hiss. You smile, panting and purring as loud as thunder, then grip me and pull me down slowly. I close my eyes, just feeling—everything—as our bodies become one.

Epilogue

"How did the opening go?"

"Fine," I said. "Almost too fine. One of the paintings went for well over a thousand."

"You could make that your real job," Revan said, smirking.

I looked around the living room, at all the canvases. "It almost already is."

"So what do you have planned for this weekend?" she suddenly said.

"What do you have in mind?"

She opened her wings and flexed them, a sight that always sent a little thrill up my spine. "I don't know. I'm just... bored."

"You have the weekend off, too, don't you?"

"Well, yes, as a matter of fact I do."

"So what do you want to do?"

She grinned.

I brushed past her, stroking a wingtip. "Let me get my things."

"I've already packed them." She held up a bag. "Have you ever made love on top of a mountain?"

"We'll cause an avalanche."

"Oh, come on." She grabbed my hand and pulled me irresistably toward the door.

"I'm serious," I protested. "Every time we stay in a hotel we break local noise ordinances."

"Better than breaking locals." She pushed me out into the apartment's hallway and locked the door behind us.

"And that's another thing. I don't think the mayor of the last town appreciated it when you invited him for dinner."

"I thought it made perfect sense, love. He makes his living by bleeding the public...."

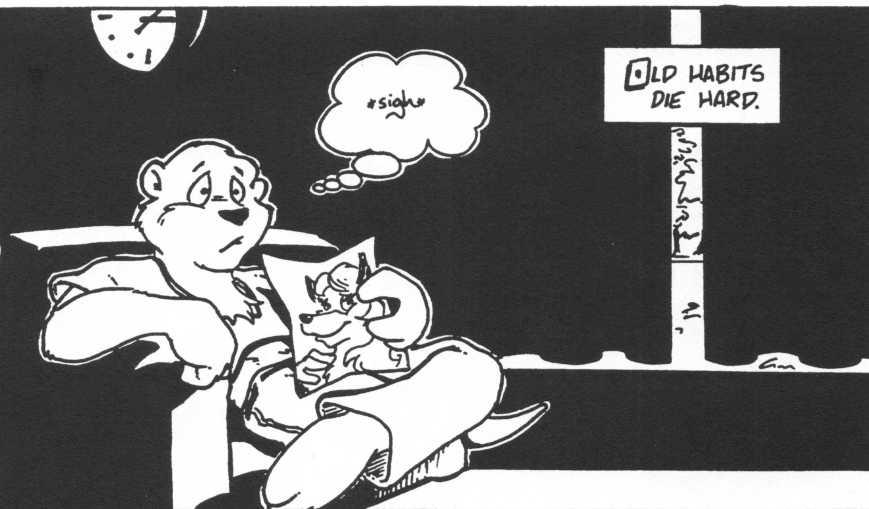


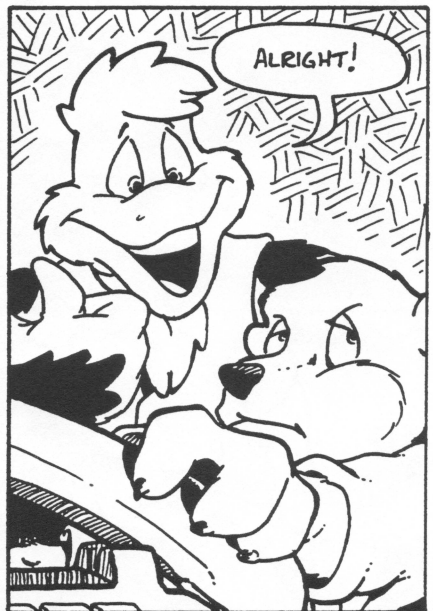
WELL GANG, I BROUGHT
THE STARTER FLUID,
DIESEL OR HIGH OCTAIN?



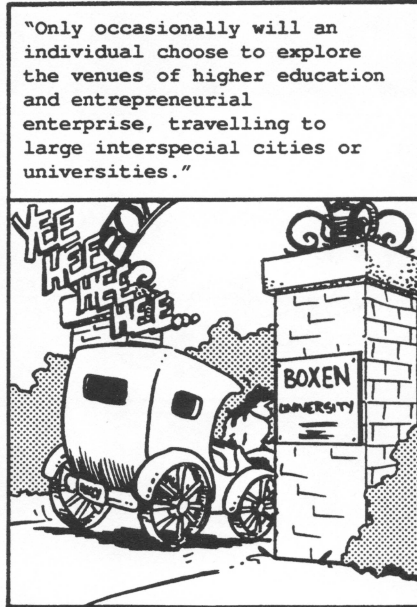
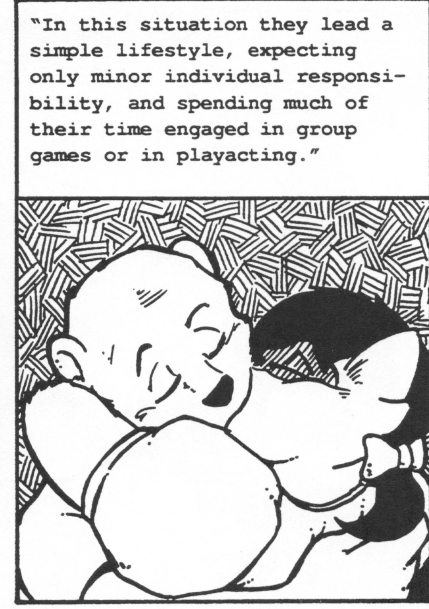
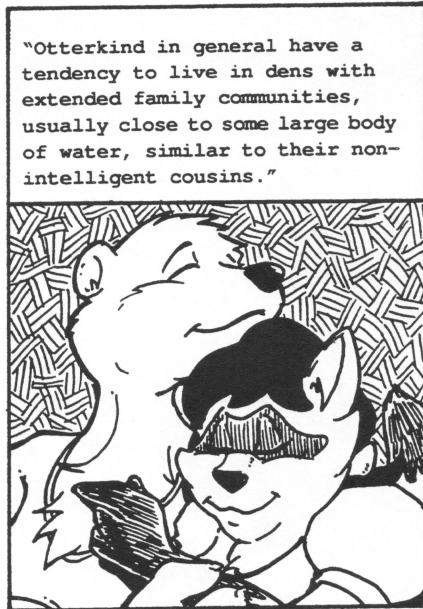
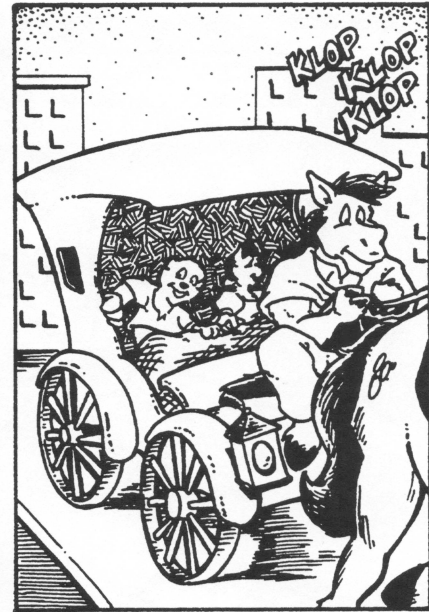
Buffalo Wings

"Circles"
Story and Artwork © 1992
by John Nunnemacher









"Oftimes in this circumstance, an otter finds himself confronted by new stressors and heightened expectations, and may show signs of depression, frustration, and obsessiveness."



"Some may at this point give up, return to their familial dens, or otherwise resign themselves to personal failure."



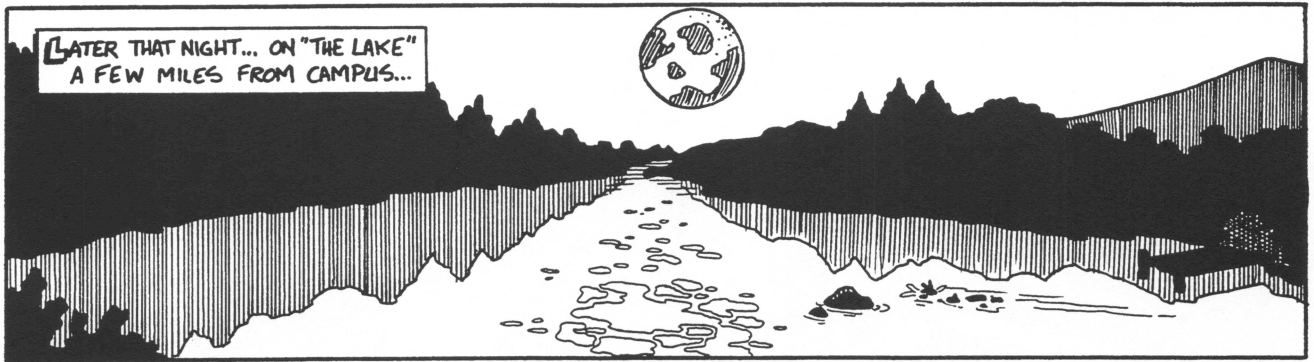
"Others, however, will find ways to accept, alleviate, deal with, or otherwise resolve such stresses, achieving a higher degree of personal growth."



"The otter will then rapidly return to the more playful, enthusiastic, and positive disposition that most mustelids are known for."

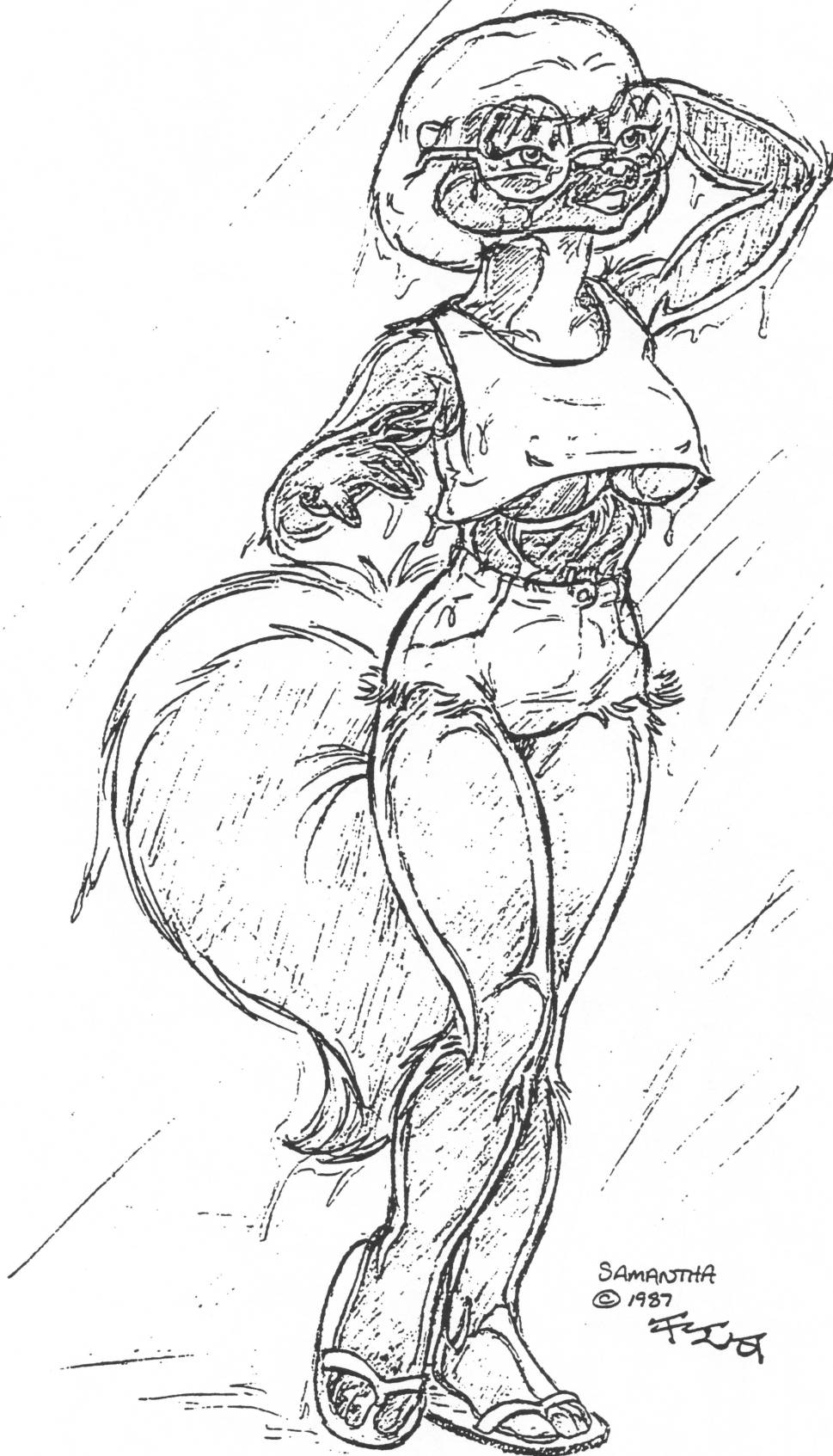


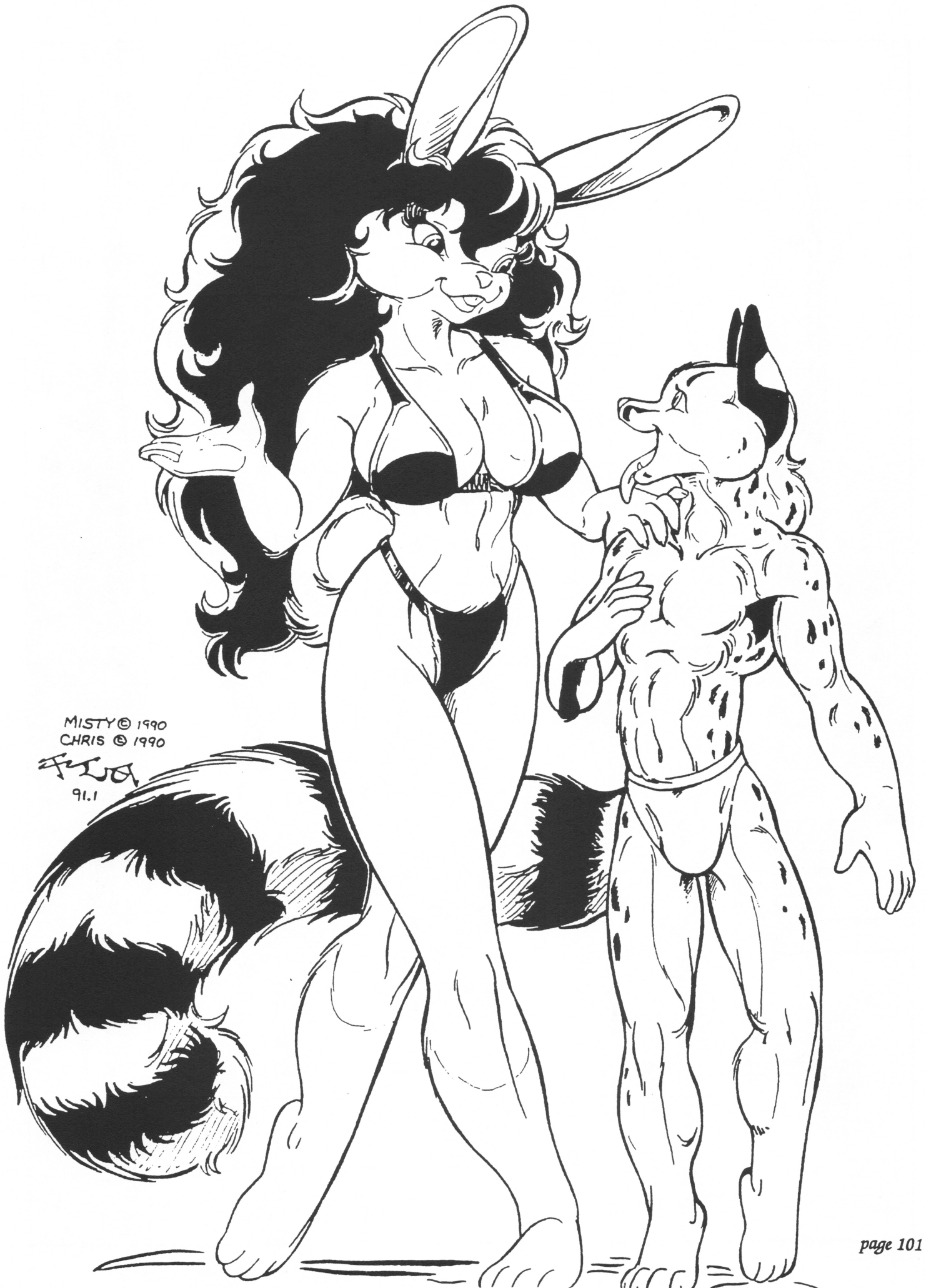


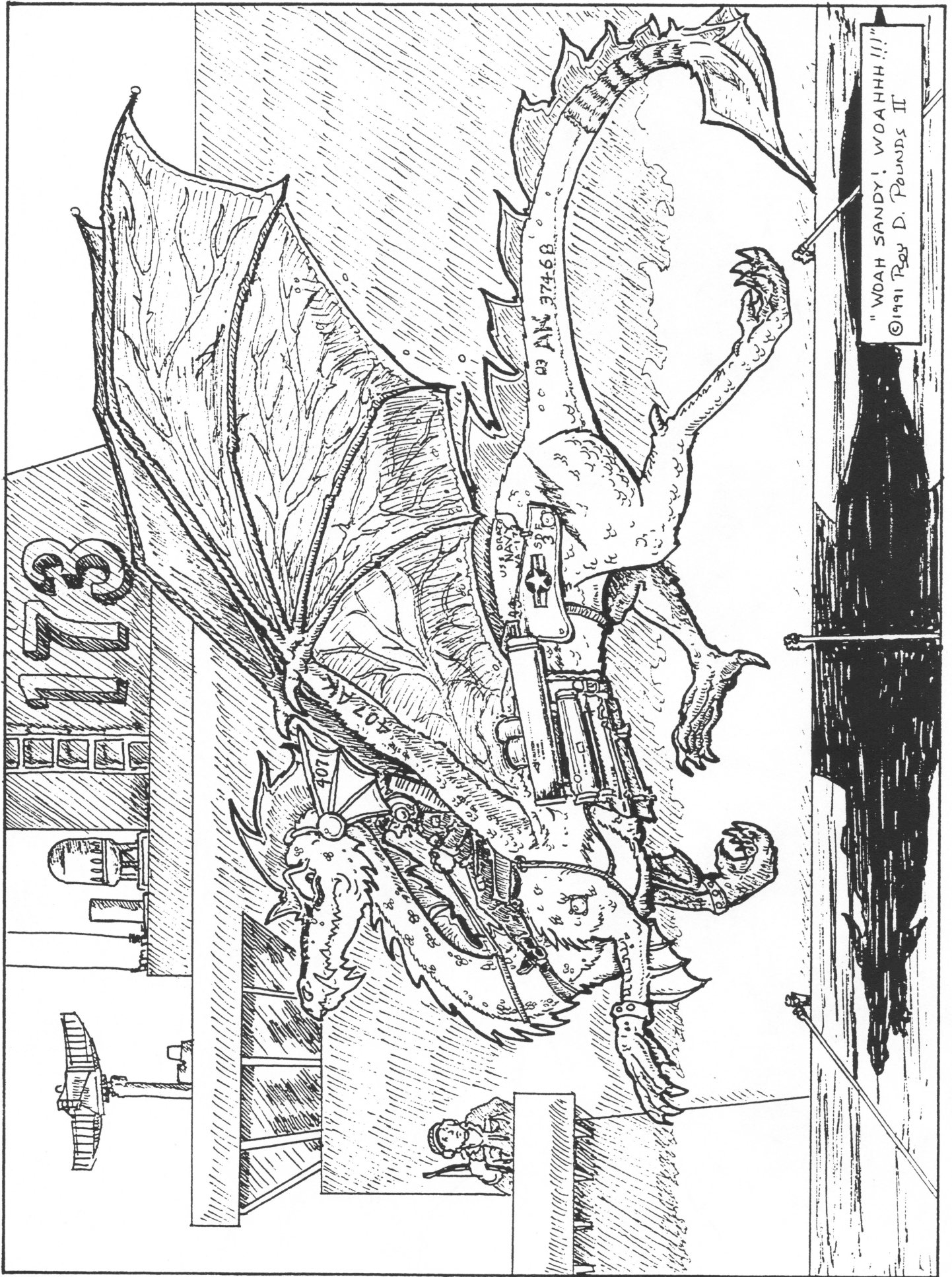


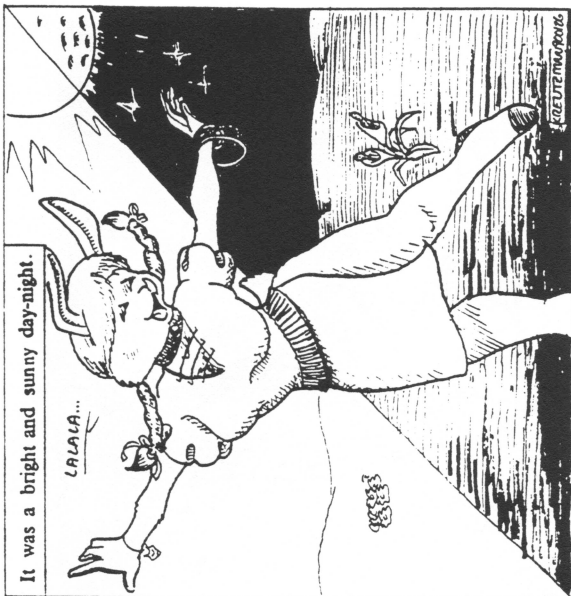






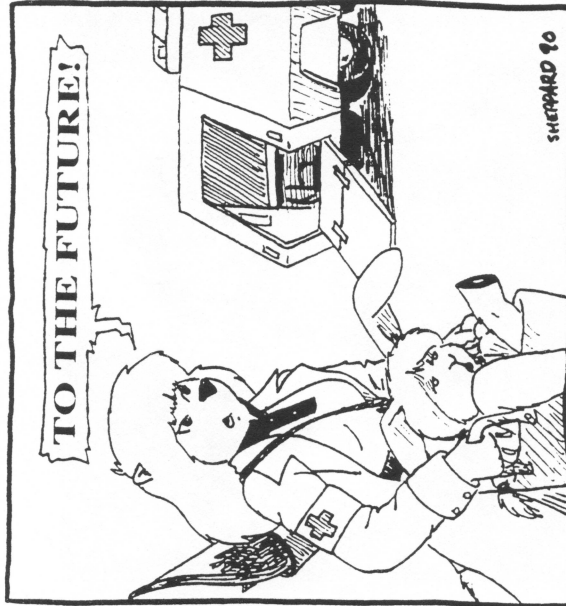
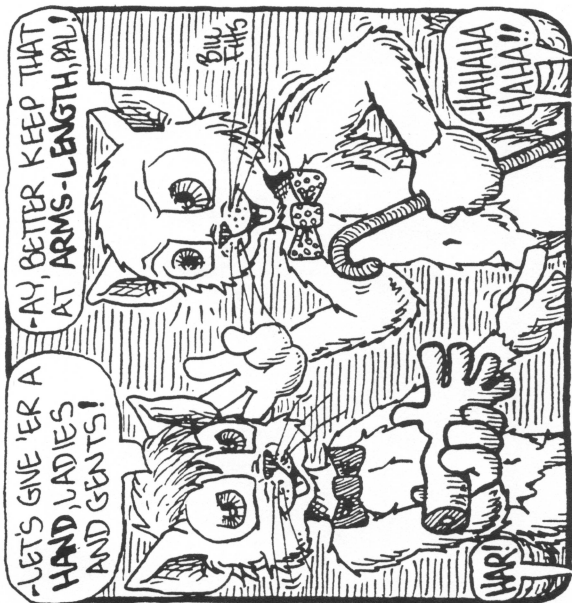


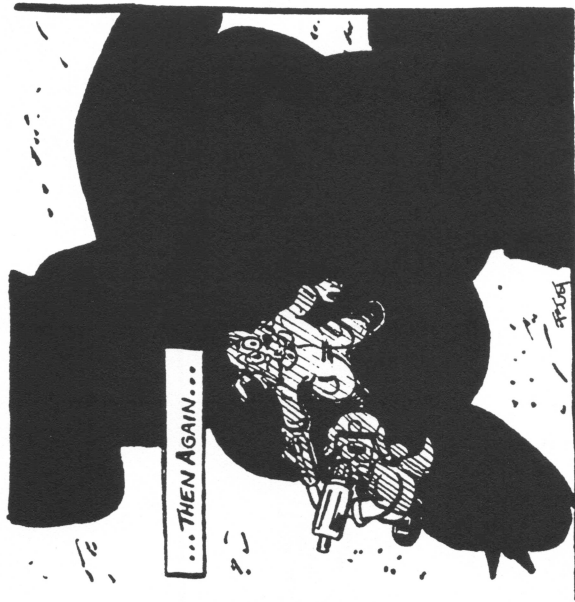


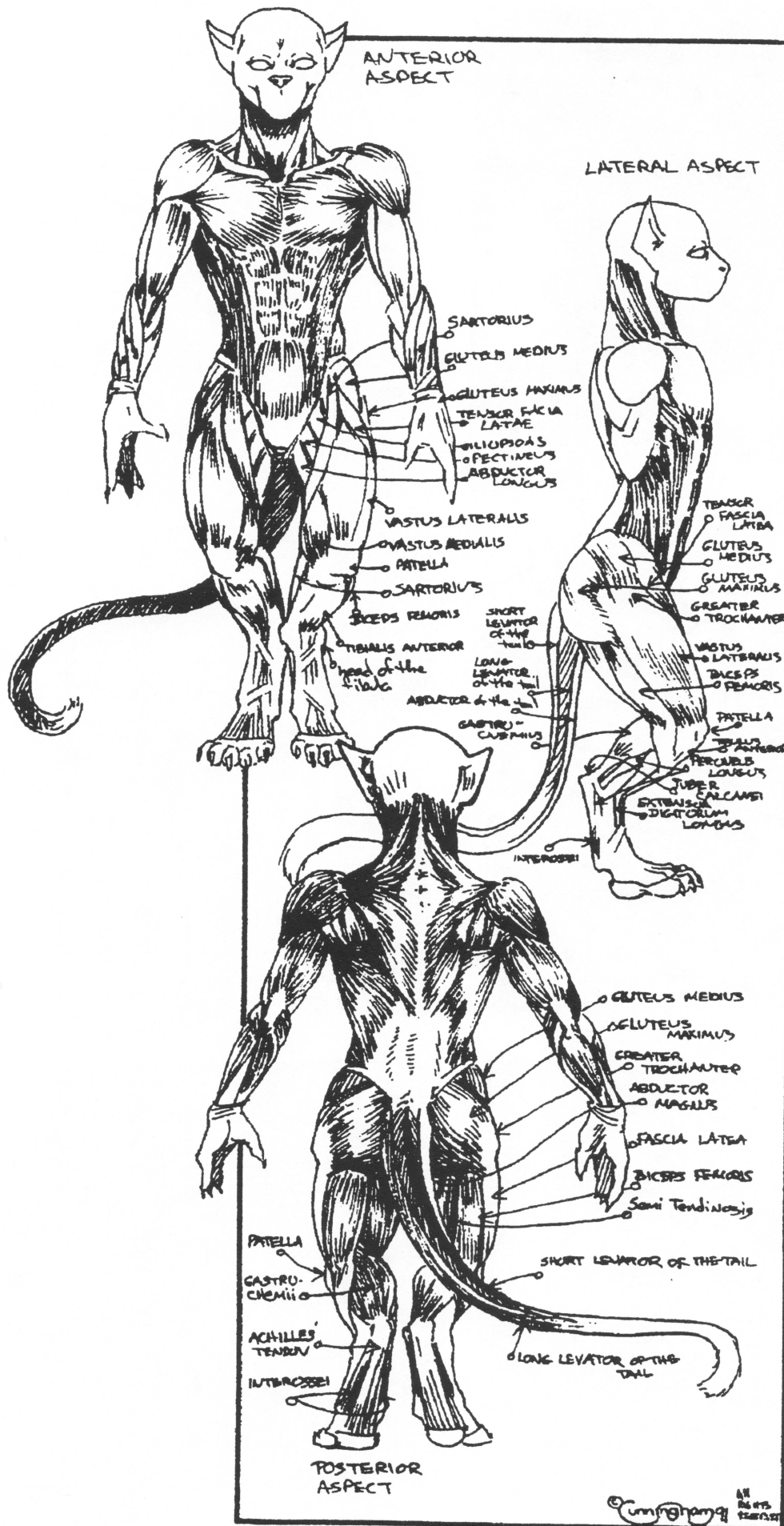


Beware of the Lizard Lady of the Galapagos!





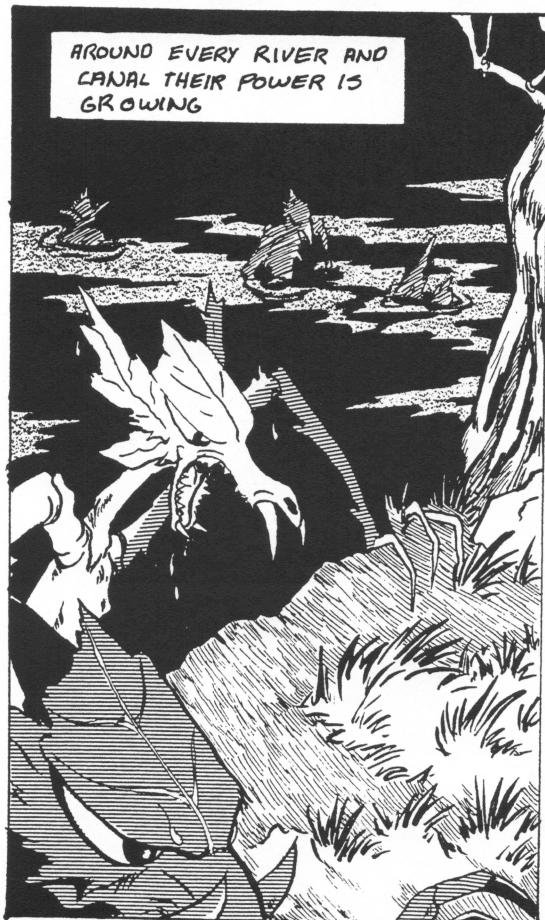
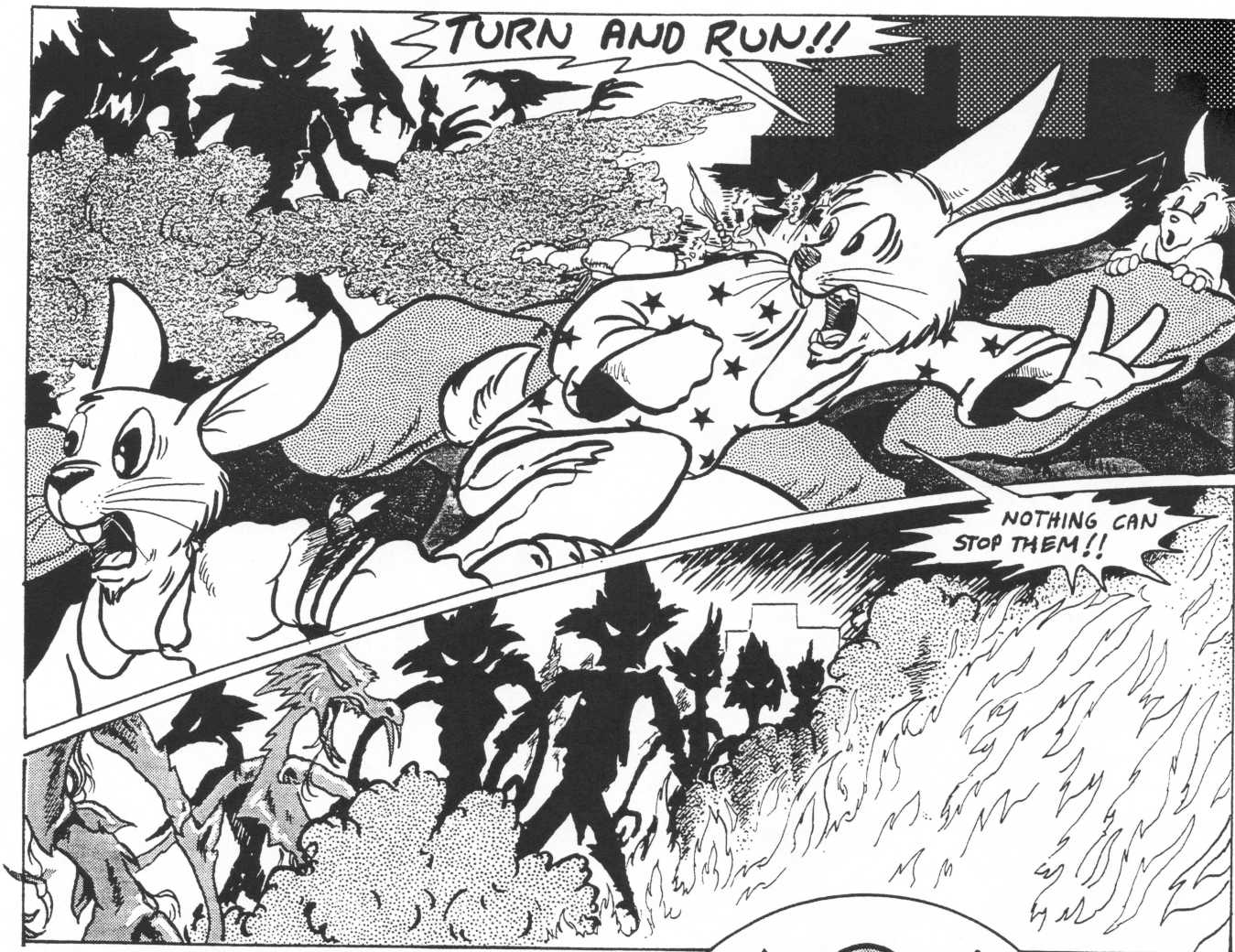


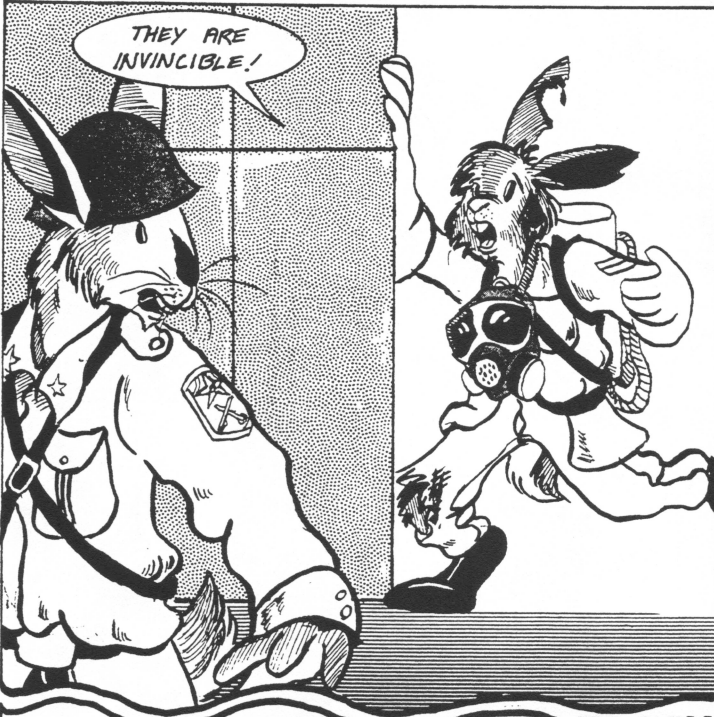
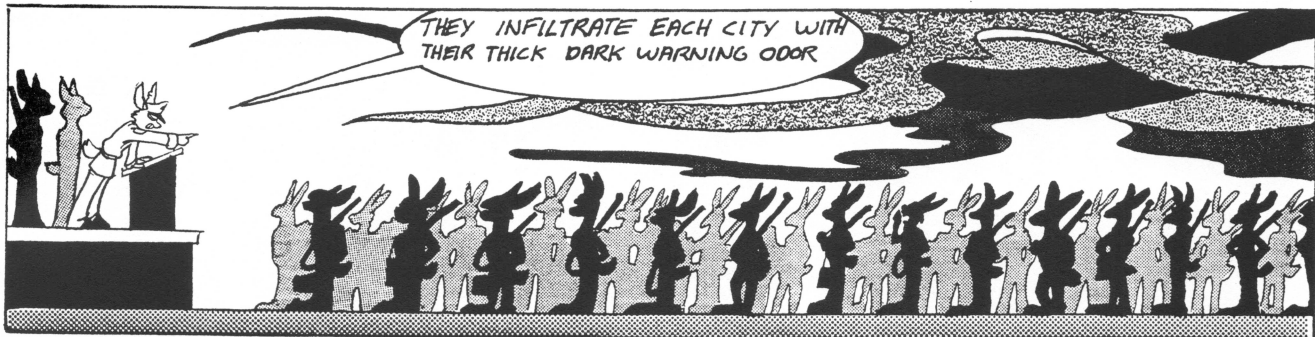


GENEALOGY

FROM
NURSERY
CRIME







FLASHBACK

LONG AGO IN THE RUSSIAN HILLS

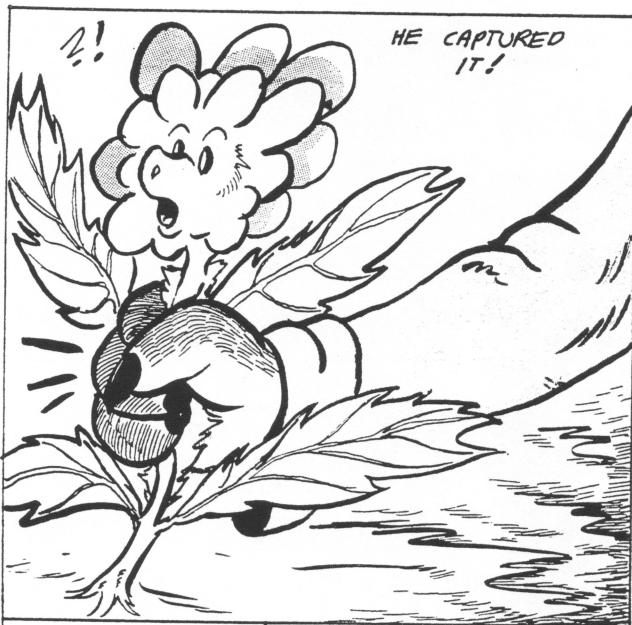


A VICTORIAN EXPLORER



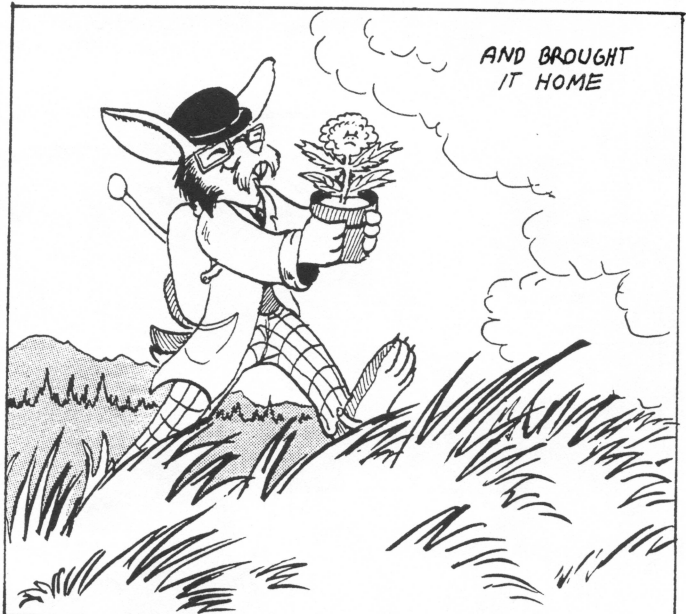
FOUND THE REGAL HOGWEED BY A MARSH





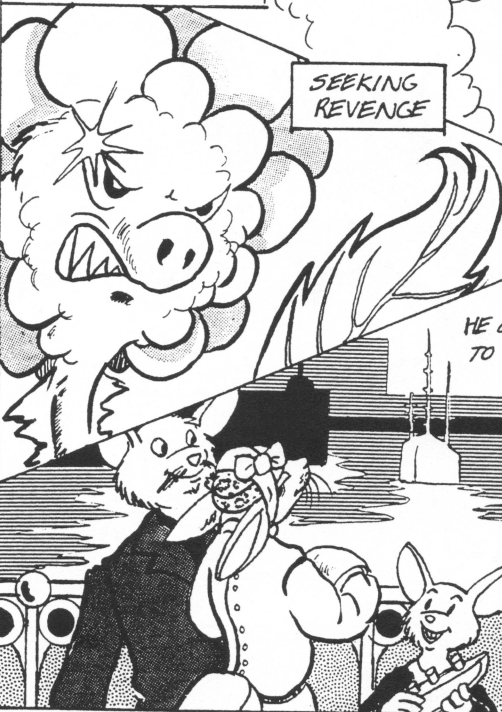
!!

HE CAPTURED
IT!

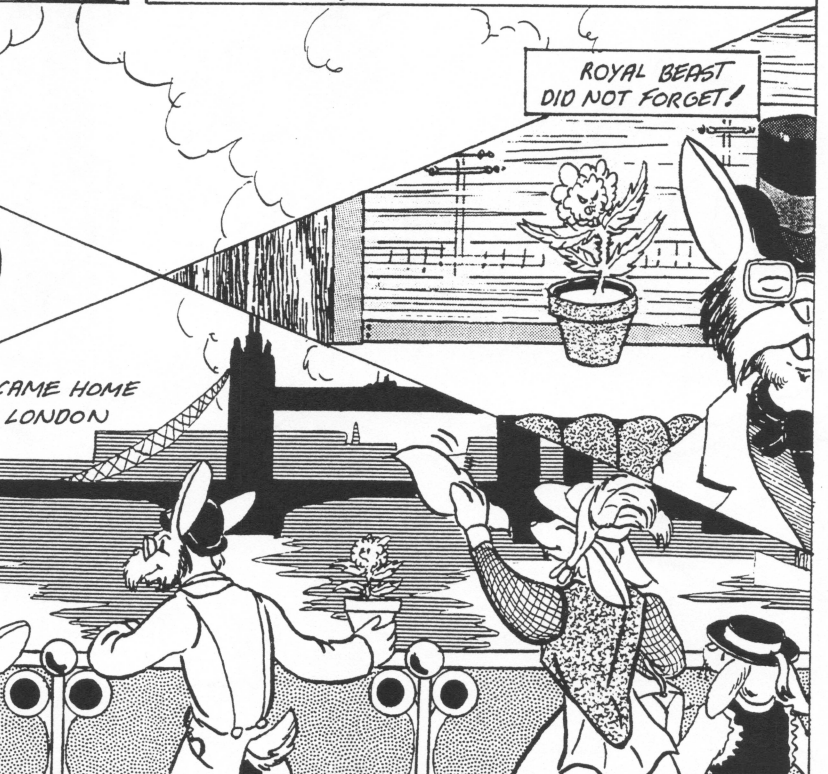


AND BROUGHT
IT HOME

BOTANICAL CREATURE
STIROD!



SEEKING
REVENGE

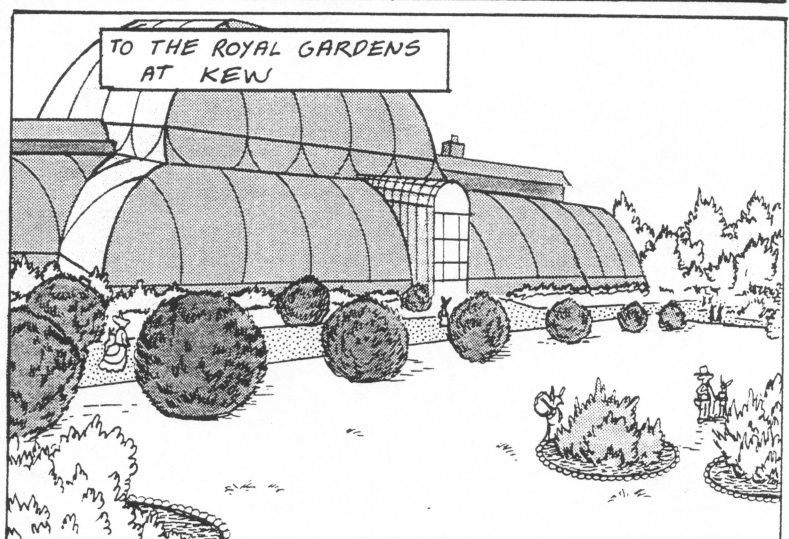


ROYAL BEAST
DID NOT FORGET!

HE CAME HOME
TO LONDON



AND MADE A PRESENT
OF A HOGWEED



TO THE ROYAL GARDENS
AT KEW



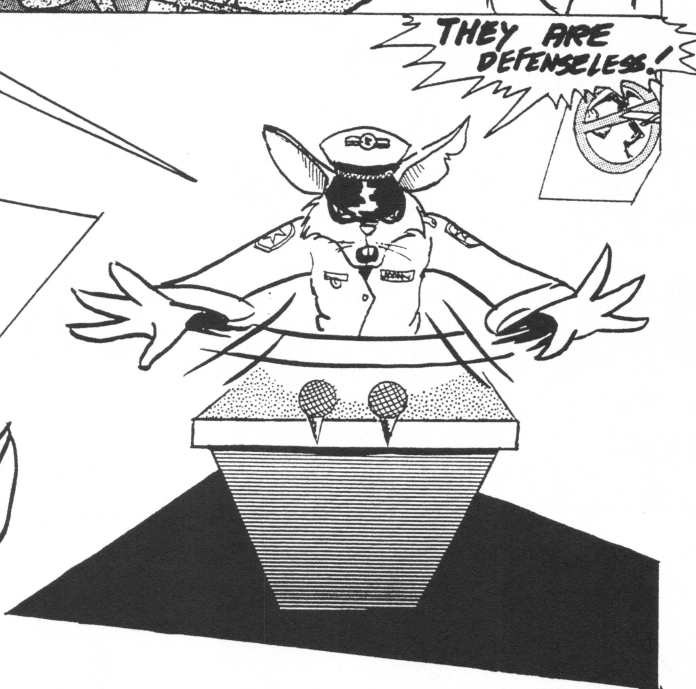
WASTE NO TIME!!
THEY ARE NOW
APPROACHING!

HURRY NOW
WE MUST
PROTECT OURSELVES
AND FIND SOME
SHELTER



STRIKE BY
NIGHT!!

THEY ALL NEED
THE SUN TO
PHOTO-SENSITIZE
THEIR VENOM



THEY ARE
DEFENSELESS!



STILL THEY'RE
INVINCIBLE!

BOTANICAL CREATURE STIRS! SEEKING REVENGE ---
ROYAL BEAST DID NOT FORGET!

SOON THEY ESCAPED ---
SPREADING THEIR
SEEDS

PREPARING FOR
AN ONSLAUGHT

THREATENING THE
LEPINE RACE!



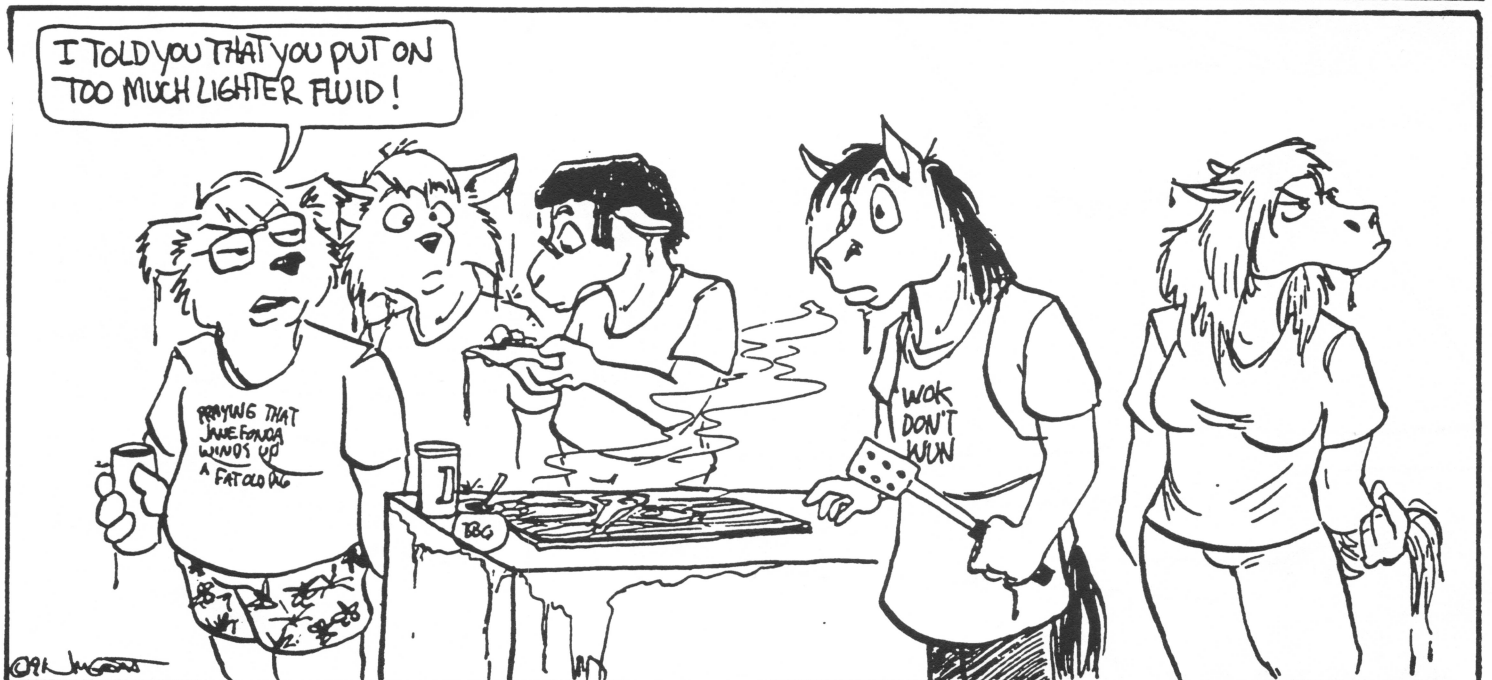
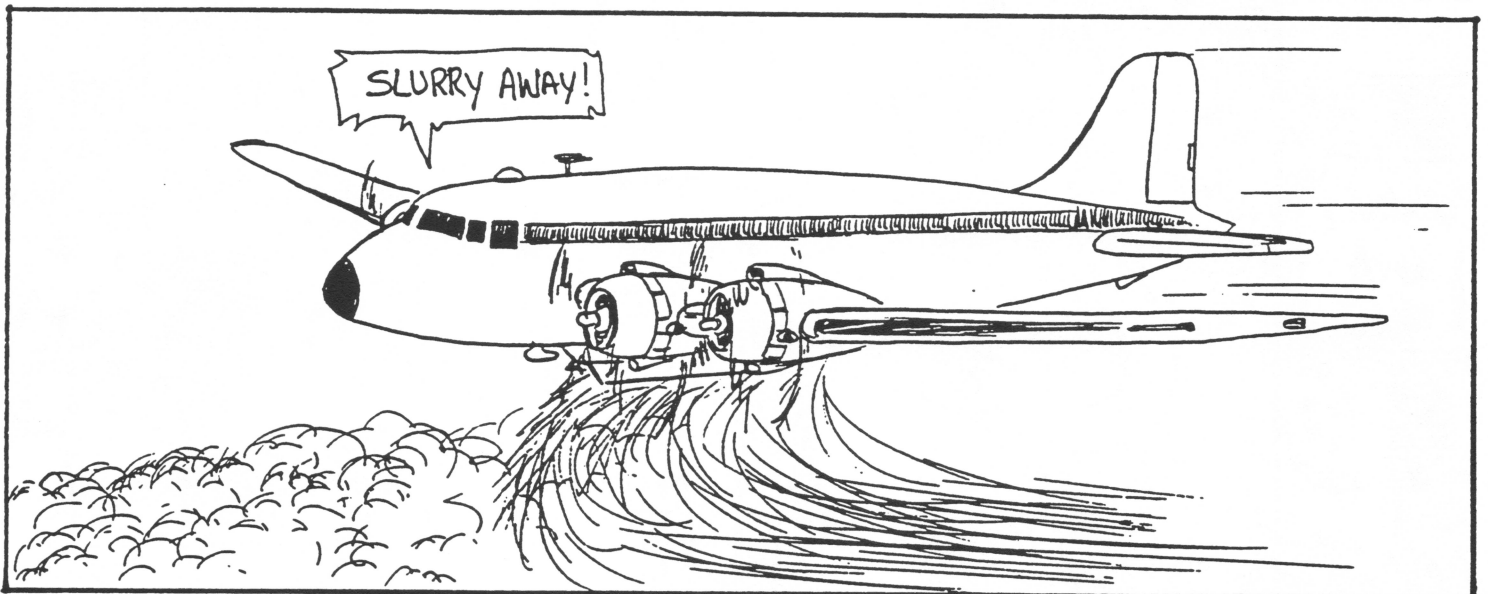
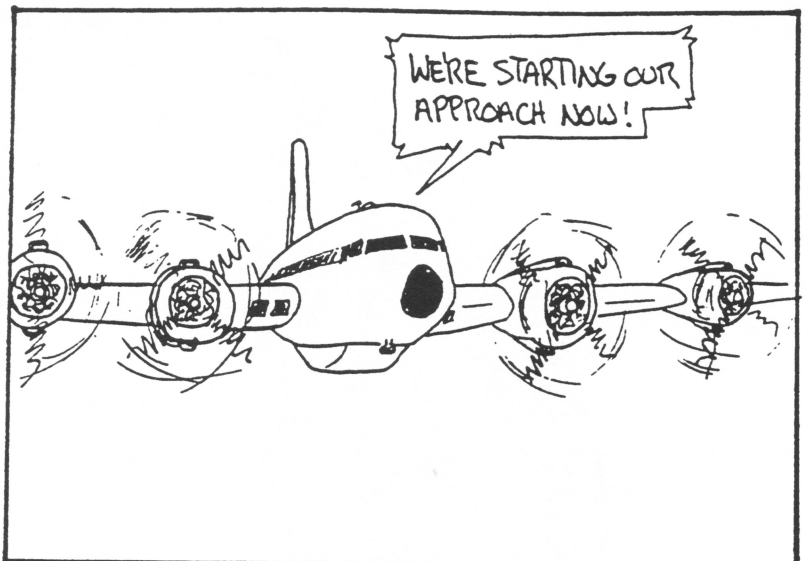
« THE DANCE OF THE GIANT HOGWEED »













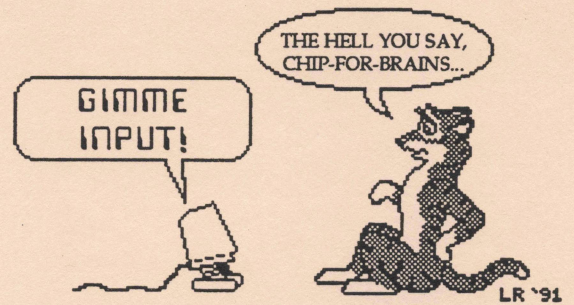
The Last Bits

DISPATCHES FROM THE ELECTRONIC FRONT

No real news to print here this time through... we'll take this opportunity to list a few important Internet addresses:

FurryMUCK: 128.2.254.5 2323
Tezuka FTP site: 128.2.209.227
YARF! inquiries: krisk@apple.com

Have fun!



KNOWN FURRY COMPUTER BULLETIN BOARDS:

SYSTEM NAME	SYSTEM OPERATOR	PHONE	PC PURSUIT OUTDIAL	MAXIMUM BAUD RATE	NOTES
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The Tiger's Den	Shayn Raney	714-530-2554	CASAN	2,400	
Tiger's Den II	Andre Johnson	714-534-9074	CASAN	9,600 (HST, V.32)	2 lines.
Clawmarks	Kyim Granger	415-452-0350	CAOAK	9,600 (V.42)	
The Polar Den	Darrel Exline	214-361-8992	TXDAL	9,600	
The Otter's Holt	Jerry Case	714-986-1525	n/a	9,600 (HST)	
Stormgate Aerie	Nicolai Shapero	213-822-6729	CALAN	9,600 (HST)	
Armadillo Connection	Sleeman & Robinson	813-378-2218	n/a	2,400	
The Electric Holt	Grenald & DeWeese	215-387-4326	PAPHI	2,400	

ADDITIONAL SYSTEMS

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Yellow Submarine	415-481-2806	CAPAL	
Shadowfox/Furverts! 3	415-452-3551	CAOAK	
ClawMarks	415-452-0350	CAOAK	
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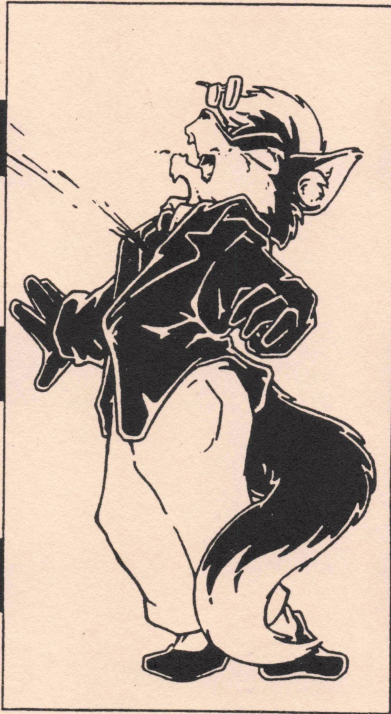
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